In *Inner Landscapes*, Shelburne, Vermont native Jonathan Harris blurs the boundaries between anthropology, software development, complex systems analysis, graphic design, and storytelling. Harris’s unique body of internet-based work exposes human emotion on massive and intensely intimate scales. Featuring nine works spanning Harris’s career, the exhibition includes: *I Want You to Want Me*, an interactive analysis of online dating commissioned by New York’s MoMA; *The Whale Hunt*, which captures Harris’s experience on an Inupiat whale hunting expedition in Barrow, Alaska; and *We Feel Fine*, which tracks global evidence of human feelings using blog entries. Harris’s work is exhibited internationally, including the Pompidou Centre, Paris, and The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and is also featured in the TED (Technology Entertainment Design) lecture series. Harris will be the Firehouse ArtLab artist-in-residence through December of 2010.

This exhibition is sponsored by Champlain College, University of Vermont Department of Engineering and Mathematical Sciences and University of Vermont Office of the Vice President for Research.

THE 2010 EXHIBITION YEAR IS UNDERWRITTEN BY THE BURLINGTON FREE PRESS AND THE ANDY WARHOL FOUNDATION FOR THE VISUAL ARTS
JONATHAN HARRIS
INNER LANDSCAPES
SEPTEMBER 10 - OCTOBER 23, 2010
“Sometimes life will give you signs, and it is good if you can see them, because they can show you the way and prepare you for what is to come. The most important signs are usually not labeled, so they are like secret signs. They occur in the physical world, but they map your inner landscape, and they are made just for you.” Jonathan Harris, Willow Creek, Oregon, January 16, 2010: Today Project.

Jonathan Harris’s art blurs boundaries between anthropology, software development, complex systems analysis, graphic design, and psychology. Fusing innovations in new media with traditional storytelling; intuition with systematic examination, Harris offers a unique vision to the world of contemporary art and hints at the possibility of an entirely new artistic language.

This catalogue documents Burlington City Arts’ (BCA’s) Fall 2010 exhibition Jonathan Harris: Inner Landscapes, a retrospective of Harris’s work, and his first major solo exhibition. Inner Landscapes brought together, for the first time, Harris’s internet-based projects, photographic work and his large scale touch-display interactive work I Want You To Want Me, commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA).

Inner Landscapes debuted two works: Balloons of Bhutan an multi-media exploration of Bhutan’s unique “national happiness index” and the interactive visual stream of consciousness Random Access Memory as well as a gallery sized, site-specific installation of the two-year long, online Today project. Concurrent to the exhibition Harris did an artist-in-residence for four months at the Firehouse’s ArtLab; made possible by a unique collaboration between the University of Vermont’s Department of Art; College of Engineering and Mathematical Sciences and Graduate Research, and Champlain College’s School for Center for Emergent Media.

Born in Vermont in 1979, Harris spent his summers and holidays at his family home in Shelburne, while attending boarding schools in New York City where he developed his skills as a painter and illustrator. He went on to Princeton University, and ultimately graduated with a major in computer science choosing it “because it was one of the only majors at the University where you actually make something.” Soon after his graduation Harris settled on programming the computer as the focus for his work. Despite the emergence of computer code-based visual art as early as the 1960s, the notion of an artist adopting software as their medium remains alien to most of the museum and gallery world. As a result, Harris began his career almost entirely outside of the mainstream artworld, like the majority of other artists working in digital media. However even at the beginning, works such as; Word Count (2004) and 10 x 10 (2004) drew attention and echoed one of conceptual art’s key themes: the role of rules and algorithms as a challenge to the centrality of the “artist’s hand.”

The use of rules and algorithms in the creation of art have a long history. As early as 1914 Marcel Duchamp’s “3 Standard Stoppages” used a strict set of predetermined rules involving the dropping of three threads from a fixed height. In the 1960’s members of the Fluxus movement routinely used instructions and scores to guide performances and audience interactions. Sol LeWitt’s “Drawing Series” (1968-1975) —perhaps inspired by the emerging field of software programming—were algorithmically driven walldrawings. Created from straight-forward sets of instructions with surprisingly complex results, they could be executed without guidance from the artist. As LeWitt wrote in 1967:

In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. [“Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”, Artforum, June 1967]
In 1968 Lawrence Weiner expanded on this notion by declaring that the instructions themselves could be the works of art; whether or not they were physically realized to him was inconsequential. His Declaration of Intent, written in response to the damage rendered to one of his outdoor art installations by unappreciative students that coincidentally occurred here in Vermont at the now defunct Windham College in Putney, states with clarity:

The artist may construct the piece. The piece may be fabricated. The piece need not be built. Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.


Clearly the idea of software as a work of art has strong precedents in contemporary art. Harris’s next body of work focused on data, data analysis and information graphics as artistic source material. Two such works We Feel Fine (2006) and I Want You to Want Me (2008) draw upon social networking sites and take the emotional temperature of their participants, representing the individual constituents of their data-sets as swirling motes of color in the case of We Feel Fine and a sky-scape of sailing balloons in I Want You to Want Me. This too has a long tradition in contemporary art; as Bruce Nauman so perfectly expressed in the title of his 1967 neon sign-sculpture The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths.

Hans Haacke’s classic work Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971 is the quintessential embodiment of investigative information graphics as art. In this work he used data collected from New York City real estate and legal records to create the room-sized information graphic. In exposing the secret slum lord empire a prominent New York business man, he also challenged the business dealings of Guggenheim trustees, and as a resulted his exhibition was canceled and the Guggenheim’s curator fired.

A unique aspect of Harris’s approach to contemporary art is his conviction that an artist creating digital art needs to have an intimate personal understanding of programming rather than merely outsourcing the task to technical experts; a dominant mode of operation for many contemporary artists today. Harris believes that an artist must experience first-hand the “resistance of the medium”, gaining a knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of a programming environment and having the opportunity to stumble upon happy mistakes.

Exhibitions of this scale require substantial underwriting. BCA is enormously grateful for the financial assistance and moral support that we received from a partnership of academic, and private sources. First we would like to thank and recognize the generosity of the University of Vermont and Champlain College. Special thanks go to UVM’s College of Engineering and Mathematical Sciences, the Art Department, and the University’s Office of the Vice President for Research, and to Champlain College for supporting the exhibition, Harris’s artist-in-residence and his lecture series. We are particularly grateful to Small Dog Electronics for providing the latest Macintosh computer technology that made the multiple interactive works featured in this project possible. Finally, we would like to thank the Houston Museum of Art for their loan of I Want You to Want Me. I would especially like to thank UVM professor Chris Danforth for introducing me to Jonathan Harris, and the Firehouse Gallery’s hardworking staff and curatorial fellows, Amanda Sanfilippo, Emily Lawrence, Megan Burgess and Pippa Harriman whose many late nights saw this complex and challenging exhibition to completion.

Christopher Thompson
Chief Curator, Firehouse Gallery
In sharp contrast to his subsequent digital work, for more than four years Harris kept elaborate sketchbooks documenting his life with daily entries of sketches, paintings, writing and found objects. After losing eight months worth of sketchbook entries to a robber in Costa Rica at gunpoint in 2003, Harris declared: “...that point is really the moment I turned to the web and to computers. I wanted to make stuff that couldn’t be destroyed in a fire from a robber.” AIGA Lecture October 16, 2010.

mixed media on paper
Commissioned by New York’s Museum of Modern Art, as part of their Design and the Elastic Mind exhibition. Harris’s second collaboration with Kamvar, it creates a surprisingly intimate view of the dynamics of human desire. Drawing on online dating sites for its information, it chronicles romantic hopes and expectations across ages, genders and sexual orientations. Harris’s visual interface is playful and highly unusual, employing floating balloons containing animated silhouettes of people engaged in a variety of sometimes ambiguous activities. Pink balloons are female and blue are male. Presented on a giant, high resolution, touch-screen monitor, viewers can touch individual balloons to reveal personal information about the dater inside, and can rearrange the balloons to highlight different aspects of the world of online dating, including the top turn-ons, the most popular first dates and the top desires.

2008, C++, OpenGL, Perl, MySql, Open Frameworks

Courtesy of The Museum of Fine Art, Houston
Inspired by The Kingdom of Bhutan measurement of Gross National Happiness, Harris traveled in Bhutan for two weeks in 2007 and interviewed 117 people about happiness. From road-workers to monks, Harris photographed each person holding a number of balloons corresponding to their perceived level of happiness on a scale of 1 to 10, and then with their one wish written on a balloon of their favorite color. This project is the debut of an early version of Harris’s Cowbird digital storytelling platform. Allowing long-form narratives to be experienced in a dynamic, non-linear environment of photos, timelines, text and movies, which can be reordered by time, place, person or theme, Harris attempts to challenge the shallow, disjointed narrative forms of Twitter, Facebook and other social media.

2006 & 2010, PHP, MySql, Javascript, HTML, Photography
Harris takes a unique artistic approach in his use of data analysis. Engaging the Internet’s massive global data-set as a window into human emotion, We Feel Fine, searches blog postings for sentences including the phrase “I feel” or “I am feeling”. Created in collaboration with Sep Kamvar, We Feel Fine collects more than 15,000 feelings along with associated images each day. The feelings are then sorted and displayed based upon the feeling expressed: happy, sad, depressed etc., and demographic/geographic information. Using a dynamic set of interfaces, individual feelings or statistical information about subsets of feelings can be searched, viewed and compared. A book based on the project, We Feel Fine: An Almanac of Human Emotion, is available from Simon & Schuster.

2006, Perl, Java, MySql, PHP, Processing
i feel so lucky to have you in my life
May 19, 2004 / from someone

i never had a sister much less four of them but i feel like i do now
April 29, 2008 / from someone

i don't feel ready
Aug 5, 2007 / from someone

i feel so much of my dad alive in me that there isn't even room for me
Oct 26, 2009 / from someone
i feel so sexy in this new wig
Jul 27, 2007 / from someone

i still feel 18
Jul 5, 2007 / from someone

i do not feel that this is limited to little kids
May 3, 2007 / from 11 year-old male

i feel like i'm on drugs
May 24, 2006 / from someone in Toronto: stoned when it was cloudy
The Whale Hunt presents the epic adventure of a Inupiat Eskimo village's traditional annual whale hunt on the ice flows of far northern Borrow, Alaska, the northernmost settlement in the United States. Harris captured the nine days he spent with over 3000 photographs taken in five-minute intervals over seven days. In moments of high adrenaline—when the whale was being cut up on the ice, for example—he increased the frequency of his photographs to a peak of 37 images in five minutes. Through this experimental storytelling interface, viewers may rearrange the photographic elements of the story to extract multiple sub-stories focused around different people, places, topics and other variables.

2007, Flash, Photography
10 x 10 Harris’s algorithm captures the top 100 words and pictures from Internet-based news websites and displays them in a 10x10 grid. Providing a unique visual cross-section of world events sampled moment to moment it also exposes the biases and sensationalism inherent in our mainstream media sources. It also allows navigation of past grids so that history becomes browseable.

2004, Perl, MySql, PHP, Flash
Word Count presents the 86,800 most commonly used words in the English language as a single enormous sentence arranged in order of the frequency of their usage; the font size gradually decreasing as the words become less common. The result is a unique view of our culture through language in its most elemental form. By providing a searchable interface, Harris inadvertently gave conspiracy theorists an opportunity to discover suspicious sequences of words such as: “america ensure oil opportunity.” 2004, Flash
Beginning on his 30th birthday, Harris undertook his highly personal, two-year-long Today project (2009-2010). Documenting each day with exquisite photography and written prose, Today was originally presented as a website laid-out in a simple grid.

In this exhibition the Today series explores the idea of narrative as a physical environment, filling the back gallery with a maze of colored yarn, connecting each photograph and text entry to others by multiple threads. Like a relational database of human emotions, with no keys provided, visitors are left to puzzle out the overarching themes of Harris’s last two years.
MEN AT 30

Last week a friend of mine told me with his long-time girlfriend after several years of trying to make it work, when he wrote to tell me, he included part of a poem called Men At Forty by Donald Justice, which goes:

Men at forty
Learn to close softly
The doors to rooms they will not be
Going back to

It is a beautiful poem that made me shudder, and it's been haunting me all week like a prophecy that came too early but that you know is true.

I'm 30, not 10, and my poem would go more like this:

Men at thirty
Have many rooms
They could go back into happily
And live in like they did.

At 30 you've come a long way, and you're standing on a landing surrounded by rooms with all kind doors swinging and baring
in the breeze. Some of the rooms you can still see into, and you remember them perfectly because you think about them all the time anyway, especially at night.

You remember how happy you were in each of the rooms and who was there and what you did and how you laughed and what you learned just how good it really was. You wonder how you ever left such a fine and happy room, and how stupid you were, though people say you only remember the good things.

At 30 you're standing at the top of the stairs looking really around at all of the doors, and you wonder if you should go back into one of the rooms and watch and if it would be, but it's so hard to decide because there are places of you in each of the rooms, and so you go into one and wonder men like the parts of yourself that are in all the others and you wonder why you can't be in
as much rooms at the same time but you know it doesn't work that way.

So you tend to decide if you should keep climbing the stairs to look for a new and better room on some other higher floor, or if you should knock on a door you already know, where the chairs and tables make the feel of your body, and where walking through the door feels like coming home.

The poem gets into me because I know I have to start closing doors but I don't like to be remanded, because it is very sad to think about closing the doors to each beautiful room - rooms that somehow get a chance because there are always so much closing to do.

In ten years I know that most of the doors will be closed, and that the act of closing them softly will be a lot like getting a cranked blanket you used to love but just can't care for anymore, and that path we call adulthood will somehow feel more violent than getting out there with a door.

- February 3, 2019 / Santa Fe, NM
LOST ANGELES

Dog theme in Lost Angeles, still waiting at the too bright light, and still feeling, like the city itself, too scattered, too uncertain, too perfect, too flawed, too inevitable, too something. I see the well-dressed young gals from far away, having to blend in. I see the well-dressed, all-shoulder women, hoping to blend in. I see the well-dressed, all-shoulder men in cut-shirts, sitting at streamside cuts like little sensations, smelling cigar and cigarettes in their pockets, hoping to make a deal. I see the dreamers, trying to get their dreams into someone else's screenplay. I see the normal people wearing baseball hats and plaid jeans, trying to look more like celebrities, and the celebrities dressed the same way, trying to look more like normal. If only everyone could learn to look more like innovators.

SOMETHING TO HOLD

- April 19, 2020 / Harper's Ferry, WV

I watch for a while this morning and saw a man in his 30s pacing slowly in his driveway and surveying his tidy house with his straight angles and box corners, as if preparing slowly but, warming up the mood, like me. I feel like I am expected to the 1950s, but knew it was impossible to escape that far, as we can move through space, but not quite through time.

Soft sand made of hard sand is broken under heavy, bumpy, the nice hat on warmed my bare arms, and I wonder why something so apparently easy could still seem so incredibly hard.

Last thing there was Malibu and Kayla to take me there, whose words and sounds and waves and birds were nowhere, but perfect, and still back the smell the city had so early before, just hours and I left here before.

- October 24, 2019 / Malibu, CA
TOLVA

The Inlandic word for computer is Tolva.

It is derived from völu, which means prophetic, and hal, which means number.

It literally means, "Gods who sees the future with numbers."

Which is my kind of goddess.

May 11, 2020 | Sigurður, Iceland

CLOUDS AND COINS

It was lovely day; nice school when I first felt comfortable

I went to a small and single banding school in Western Minnesota, and big between mountains and city to the kind of a town that is afraid through a city life I will with its form and maybe bigger buildings. It was the kind of a city

that small you feel special.

They had a thing they called "The Love Project." Let it be for, "a place of all places." That's what the teachers always wanted to be. Oh when had been

with them, you read with them, shared sports with them, read anything to

them, and after four years you would pretty much know them. Bed, you didn’t have

their face, and they didn’t remember your face well for an injury.

You never thought those people were shown you, or that there

might be where after you, but once you were there you actually here

what you heard will be, and there was feel special - just

unbelievable and oddly.

Now I tell this way everywhere I go. The younger they are, the more

I feel it, and the more I tell myself what I might do in my life and what

kind of love I have because, now that I've had all this one, I am full and

I think how much more I love them than I do, and I think about what

they do with the one, and how sure they'll want me away. Then

I start. All by writing of how I love them, and I go away writing
dather, partly into a mad and driven and what I do with me

my whole book in high school used to be, the every grade teacher should

have that his best student will I end by doing it, but I guess I never

wants to be the final as master, or in total get out.

I remember that when I was a boy I asked my Mom what I looked

some made, that book she didn't know, evently, and bow that would be a good

way for my a smart career. I remember bring awareness that someday
could grow up to be an adult and will be my mine who was them close at

all who will it. I am most without feeling really what I am called. Well, finally

I told them if you this will be many other in the thing?

Now that I am entering into the get our mom was them, I understand these
totally thing that you mean the as being, just between your own art and color

I don't this is loving in that particular way. It will not that you is that

it's just the way thing are.

In truth, I had a class called General Knowledge, and it was the best
class I ever had important for any. It was called the a good class in that

thing that should have been, but I thought people other than us doing -

what was so call a group of races to discover, how to understand the

relationship between us and in recalculating for ice poles not your world, and

what, exactly, could not made of wonder world.

The class was a crash course in things that are rarely having a story and

be called, like the story over the course of your life. This class was so

important because it was so little (big world), and so much (big

school). It basically was a way of putting an actually - a reflection of what you

tried to and got out and something comments.

Any way I thought what he would memoir it did not them in school. The

project was all a number of accounts in every time it would be. That was on the

school. It is so much, but so I would be embarrassed to think the teaching of life

in the life, that it took how many years will get right or all the tomorrow, and

how hard it would be to understand art.

When you're walking up the streets looking for art, you never know what

you're going to find, and it is that much with ice, so much thickened into

different season, and this amazing alleyway is really what strange

less, because all understand this understand every imagined, dreams into how to

cut the total-what ever, others into cloud, but you can never put it into the

cloud.

As all you good in me and she knew our metaphor would sound: but

and then the way my ideas with understanding things popular of being lost and

want to things or, as told put it - "remembering to the deep roots of

LILP.

I am continually firm between the borders of the coat - who are known for

their ability to see things as they may be - and the dreams of the world -

who are known for the 21st life is seeing the things that are not but that should

be, and help to bring them. This is mostly about everything, that other is

mostly about righting and coming. Being from the U.S., it is noticed for

me to know the sound kind of stories, even as I am this wisdom of the

land. But whenever I try to become like an eastern metas, it always feels

like strange, waiting kind, or a suffer.

May your mind and theories be finding away in the only way thing.

This at my age, I can't explain that, because I am still sitting up

and theory over the act. So I can make out of there.

May 10, 2020 | Alaska, U.S.
OCEANIC ABYSS

LIKE Raven
LIKE badball
LIKE headdell
LIKE fightball
LIKE saw
LIKE One Word
French K 20
Windy 100

- May 18, 2010 / Greiffstaun, Iceland
FIND YOUR FEET

And all at once you start thinking about something you have not been able to do before, but which is at the same time not new, and what you have to do quickly in to find your feet before you fall, or if you are going to fall then to fall into someone who will catch you and hold you until you can begin again on each of your two or four feet.

- December 19, 2002 / Chadds Ford, PA

ONLY A MAN

Some time my parents and I will raise you coffee cider and milk and showy medals. I will pull it from the cellar and you will brush away the flies, and I will cut it sideways with my own knife and you will run into the grass because you cannot stand the smell of it. And I will laugh and pummel the head with my hand until the coffee. I will take your eyes and show it in my hair, and you will make sure that it will break and break the head and I will pull for the bell of the dinner in the kitchen and I will bring the things for us to eat and we will put them on my feet with a hand in between us and I will show you flowers. I will get them from the railway and you will see how they will only show you things, but - accidents and surprises and all my things, especially the grey and only my ears show really the red one. I will treat my things like kids because I never had a wife and never had a family, and they are very kind, all my things and they are very good. I don't get that grey one. But I will get a dandelion and it will get tired and my back will get out and I will have to bring the bread to the slaughter and I will take my ears to get over the saddles, but when I am out I am sick or my dog is very happy and I will put my hands on the bars and I will see the money from the sheep to buy some cars and I will not buy one car or two cars but three cars and I will keep them. In my barn under the grass it and under the sheep and I will not show them, but sometimes I will let them and work them all around the valley, in front of the mountain or in the field or not in the snow or the flowers and I will take pictures of the cars in those places because I love them equally the places and the cars that are mentioned in the stories. I will have pictures of the cars and I will get the red one next to the blue one and the blue one next to the blue one and I am blue and next to the blue one and because I have two blue units. I used to let it run, then I was a man more, then I was a cow man, then I was a sheep man, but now I am only a man and I hope you liked the coffee cider and milk and showed me things I knew you didn't like the sheep food and it was too hot in the house but I will never make the windows because there was a time when we were cold.
KEEP IT TOGETHER
- August 30, 2010 / Cincinnati, OH

NOT MINE
The child is not mine, and the dog is not hers.
- November 8, 2011 / Shakers, OK
EYJAFJALLAJÖKULL

Many times I thought it was a dream,
Earth could not possibly contain these things,
That suicide water,
That grey fog shrouds,
That eerie light,
That moist mist,
That moving mist,
That doomed farm,
That redoubt arch,
That monstrous cloud,
Those powerless piles,
Those miniscule gulls.

I wondered how could all that destruction possibly be so beautiful,
And then I wondered how could it possibly not.

- May 1, 2010 / Skogar, Iceland
"You gonna kill anything today?" says a voice from outside my motel room at dusk.

"Got a part of myself, I should respond - but I don't know that yet, so I say nothing.

The voice belongs to one character better who is trying to talk me ahead by asking fast and hard and again and like is he going to kill anything today. When he knows very well they or both going to kill something and probably many things today because they are two characters and they are here to hurt and kill characters.

Sometimes I think I will just say yes, and it is good if you can see them, because they can show you the way and understand you for what is to come. The most important things are usually not visible, so they are like silent signs. They are in the physical world, but they are not the inner landscape, and they are not made for you. Even if they are silent, you cannot read them directly - instead, you must see feeling and witness to uncover their meaning.

The man at the motel calls me where I am going and says he has seen that first. He says that first I should go north to see the view, and I say, I say, that may be I will. He says that really, really, I should see the view before leaving, and he invites me to the lake. He says that there is something interesting waiting for me there. I say I can take it is my place but he asks me, and then I remember you can’t take pictures of the view.

So I drive 20 miles north on a dirt road to the plains, which is wide and desolate and totally deserted, with blue cloudless earth stretching as far as the eye can see. I see a black sign that tells me to read it, which leads me to the edge of the world. I park the car, get out, and look around. In my fingers, it crumbles like dead cheese. Under my feet it is soft. I see the sky.

After a while, I come to a path where a wood that points to the other side and seems to be the end of the way.

Soon I see a small white box sitting in the dirt. As I get closer, I see it is a little box, which is a very strange thing to find in the middle of a field. Standing near the box and looking at it is a careful moment, lingering there. Walking towards it, a path of wood is scattered from its shadow, which seems to suggest that something is about to change.

I go to get my car and drive onto the dirt in a trance, slowly and with awareness. Covering the seat, just for the hell of it. I play reluctantly at the center and stop and get out. There is a large and perfect circle drawn in the dirt. I walk into it, and my whole body starts to regret. Like some kind of invisible energy is nothing through me. I sit around watching the light, and try to understand what it is.

I now know the cozy little box was the start of something, and that something was something that was brought into the open and completed in solitude. I think out the signs as I go on, and the circle is the bell tower. It is the circle that points to the future and the circle that forms a shadow that falls on the floor. I walk around the circle, and each step of the circle is a step towards the center. I think about the future and the past, and the circle becomes a symbol of the future and the past, and the circle becomes a symbol of the future and the past. I think about the future and the past, and the circle becomes a symbol of the future and the past. I think about the future and the past, and the circle becomes a symbol of the future and the past.

So I sit in the dirt and I think for a while and I write a little bit, and when I get up I see the signs some water to be with the old man. But on my way I see the end of something, and I think about other things that have died.

- Part 2: The Sun -

I drive north, across the black and desolate wastelands of the southern Oregon, and barely see another car. I drive dirt roads through canyons, up and down hills, over mountains, and across wide open plains. I am flying down a road not far from the coast where the mountains rise and the sun sets. I am running over the mountains, covered in snow and surrounded. And in the dirt is a few miles, I see a pit at the side. Behind me is the sea, the mountains, the clouds, and the snow. I think about the past and the future, and I think about the past and the future. I think about the past and the future, and I think about the past and the future.

I sit in the dirt and I think for a while and I write a little bit, and when I get up I see the signs some water to be with the old man. But on my way I see the end of something, and I think about other things that have died.

- The Man: "Never said a breath. Shot a rifle a few times."
"The world to now?"

My heart is beat my feet, and I am very nervous, and try to think what would be the best way to handle this. I say, "Sure."

He takes the rest of his beer, toasts two others, puts the can on the ground, walks back, and hands me the gun.

"Just cock it and shoot."

"Is there a big kid?"

"You like a 22?"

So I aim at the can and pull the trigger, and the can goes flying along the ground and my ears are ringing very loud and I just fired a 22.

"Damn! You should never shoot a 22! I believe!"

"Nope, never. Guess I'm just lucky."

I think he is surprised and he lets me take his picture, so I feel a bit better taking off my clothes and bathing in the hot springs, which now feel especially depleted. Finally green algae dance through the water and onto my skin, and the ballet casting glint next to me in dark, still bright by the sun.

The men drive off for more guns, leaving me all alone. I keep on south into Nevada, pasting cows, cattle, and a Christmas light cross, which collectively seem just over my head.
It is late and I haven’t eaten since breakfast, so I am tired and hungry and I walk into the town of the Bubbles, Nevada. As I drive slowly down the main drag and look at the only hotel and restaurant in town, I rub my eyes a few times in disbelief, for each time I see the same thing, so I know where it is I will be eating dinner and where it is I will be sleeping tonight.

I walk inside past curious artwork and take a seat in the bar and order a tall beer. In my room, at a square table next to the wall, the man at the neighboring table is a former bull rider, a former jockey, who returned to keep his wife with another man, so he moved here and bought an RV park with crystal meth dealers. He talks constantly to me without interrupting for more than an hour. I only go in and out as he goes from party to party, to his side apartment, to electricians’ stencils, to middle Eastern artists, to gold miners, to control. He can slip into various mentalities, to geographical evasions, to release a prairie photography in the myth of the climate change, to nurturant national production, to food shortages, to martial authority, to city’s less, to neighbors, to hear my boss and diddles, and on and on, every sentence slanting his position or standing up briefly to play a champ, but never daring to talk.

I have the feeling that some lesson is being taught all of this work, but I am too tired to finish it out. It is one of those conversations that begins very intense, but quickly becomes exhausting, and instead of really listening to what words you listen only for a break in cadence when it would be polite to excuse yourself and leave. I really like it, it has been lonely talking for a long time. I think that maybe something he said he did itself, my subconsciously and will rearrange me at some crucial moment between here and the more, but who knows when or what that might mean.

He follows me through this place, pointing out gamblers who owe him rent. They are hiding in the light of the slot machines and smoking, having to work to defy their arch enemy, which strikes me as a terrible strategy. We go outside onto the night, our faces glowing red from the harsh light of the 2x1 CMOS go overhead. I sip up my beer and wish him well. We shake hands and roll away into the cold Nevada night.

-- January 10, 2010 / Willow Creek, OR
I first met Jonathan Harris in 2003. He was fresh out of Princeton where he'd been studying Computer Science and Statistics. I was head of Interactive at Fabrica, the Benetton Communication Research centre near Venice and Jonathan was interested in doing a fellowship at Fabrica to develop his artistic practice. I couldn’t believe my luck — I offered him a bursary halfway through that first meeting. It wasn’t just that Jon’s technical and mathematical skills were shockingly good — what impressed me most of all was his seriousness of purpose in thinking through and working out a vision of a new kind of art — art made out of lots and lots of data.

Installed in the idyllic surroundings of Fabrica Jonathon started working on $10 \times 10$—his breakthrough piece as an artist and the piece which paved the way for the monumental *We Feel Fine*, created with Sep Kamvar shortly after leaving Italy.

What I remember most about Jonathan in those early years at Fabrica are the discussions we had together — the back and forth, the working through of arguments about art and technology in an exchange of ideas. I’m delighted — and honoured — to be able to continue this process of discussion and exchange to mark Jonathan’s first solo exhibition.

First, aesthetics. How do we think about art which is new, which is doing new things with new techniques? How do we judge it, how do we make sense of it and how do we ascribe value to it? What happens when the technology of art changes and new things happen? For example, how do we think about the aesthetics of interactivity - the opportunity for a representation to speak back, as it were, to the audience. This is a new thing - a new category of beauty as Myron Krueger put it — and it demands a new aesthetics because it doesn’t work in the same way, doesn’t do the same thing, as a painting does, or a photograph does.

As a measurement, the simplest rule I can imagine is that the art should be consistent with itself. Meaning, the art should establish a symbolic (not programming) language of its own, and it should follow that language in every detail — from the largest to the smallest. This is not consistency for its own sake, but consistency as a signal for a complete and well-understood point of view, which you might also call a voice.

Especially with digital work, where the creator is usually more removed from the original act of expression than a writer or painter would be (i.e. code is abstract, while words and pictures are direct), having such a consistent voice is doubly important, because that voice — that consistency — is the only thing in the work that indicates the presence of the artist. Without this voice, the data-based digital artist is more like an interior decorator or librarian, than like an artist. So this voice is very important. This “voice” is not the same as “style”. Aesthetic style is part of voice, but voice is much more — it is a whole conceptual framework for self-expression — a way of understanding the world, posing questions and depicting answers.

There are only a few digital artists whose work I can immediately identify on sight — Yugo Nakamura, Casey Reas, Golan Levin and maybe a few others. Their work is identifiable because their work is precise — it is consistent with itself. Even when mediums evolve very quickly, and when a critical sense of “aesthetic quality” has yet to emerge, a sensitive eye can usually spot consistency, and the presence of consistency is often a clue that there is good work happening therein. So consistency is like an early warning signal. This idea of consistency also occurs among writers and filmmakers, who design worlds where every detail must feel like it belongs, and if there is a detail that does not belong, the illusion immediately collapses. The same is true with programming digital worlds and experiences — the illusions are fragile and can easily collapse if there are weak elements. When new worlds emerge, they often require new languages. Likewise, when new languages emerge, they often create new worlds. Artists need to work both sides of this equation. When culture changes, the old languages are often very bad at describing the new culture. For instance, oil paintings about the Internet seem very silly to me. When there is a new culture that needs to be described by artists, it is often good to use pieces of that culture to do the describing. That is why work about the Internet should draw from the Internet, use the language of the Internet, and be presented on the Internet — the native land will always be most natural.
It’s really interesting to hear your thoughts on ‘voice’. It makes complete sense to talk of the internal consistency of an articulation — and the sense of a coherent ‘character’ behind the articulation. At the same time I’m struck by a sort of paradox here — one of the things which defines interactive and generative art is the extent to which the artist isn’t really making an articulation — in a sense isn’t actually saying anything, or at least, not making ‘statements’ in the traditional sense. A writer makes up statements like ‘the horse stood in the field’ and the painter also makes statements visually — summoning things into existence through the illusion of paint on canvas. What you do — in common with other interactive and generative artists, is to stand at once removed from the articulated statement — instead focusing on a way to provide a context for the statements of others, to frame the statements of others.

This, it seems, to me is the essence of the new languages which you describe — that the artist is once-removed from making a direct statement. So it’s not really self-expression in the old sense. Now, I completely agree with you that certain interactive and generative artists — like Levin or Nakamura — make work which is recognisably theirs. But when Levin, for example, makes a sound reactive which responds to other people’s voices — and which only exists in a sense when other people speak, it makes the notion of the artist’s voice that much more difficult to pin down.

The dilemma you point out is fascinating, and could be the crux of many of the problems facing interactive work (the art world doesn’t take it seriously, the interactive artist can’t find out how to translate his personal experience and suffering into his work, interactive artists sometimes seem interchangeable, etc.).

When you are not a maker of gestures but a maker of frames, then as a frame-maker, you compete on how clever you are in choosing good frames, and on the craftsmanship of the frames you end up creating, but not on the originality and emotional resonance of the actual work, because the actual work is what’s inside the frame (in this case, the data), and not the frame that contains it. It’s almost like the artists here are not the people like me (who make the frames), but the millions of individuals whose words and pictures show up inside the frames I make.

On the other hand, I love Chekov’s idea that the role of the artist is not to answer questions, but rather to pose them fairly. In this sense, the formulation of statements is unimportant — even presumptuous. Instead, it is the ability to pose interesting questions (i.e. create good frames) that defines the artist in the Chekovian sense, interactive artists are right on the money!

When I was younger, I made a lot of projects that tried to deal with very big themes (10 x 10, the Yahoo! Time Capsule, even We Feel Fine), but as I get a bit older, I realize how little I really know, and those early projects now seem brash and immature — even a little tacky. At the ripe old age of 31, I’m more interested in posing good questions than in offering answers.

As for your point about Levin’s sound-reactive works only existing when other people speak — that’s true, yet still, there is a particular worldview that Levin possesses which dictates the design of his frames, and you can see that worldview (goofy, playful, beautifully crafted) in the situations he designs. Even if he is not making ‘statements’, you can still read his worldview in his frames (even in his annual Holiday cards), and his worldview is consistent.

Another aspect of the question of aesthetics connects to the emerging field of data visualisation. What is the aesthetic of data? How is the aesthetic of data linked to function? What makes data beautiful?

Making data beautiful requires beautiful data. Data cannot be made beautiful by design or by anything else. Data can be made pretty by design, but this is a superficial prettiness, like a boring woman wearing too much makeup. Design can only reveal beauty that already exists — hidden beauty — usually by eliminating clutter and rearranging elements. In this way, design is more like makeup remover than makeup.

I do not consider data visualization to be an artistic genre. It is a tool that has become fashionable, and so it has grown beyond its purpose, claiming an outsize self-importance. Most data visualization work is not interesting because most data is not interesting.

When Sep and I were making We Feel Fine and I Want You To Want Me, we operated under the premise that the underlying data, presented in plain text format, had to be very beautiful, or else we would not include it. Once we had found data like this, the various visualizations were just playful frameworks for revealing different aspects of that data. But the data had to be beautiful to begin with — that’s the part most people forget. It is the same with my photo-based works, like The Whale Hunt and Today — if the underlying photos are not good, the final interactive projects will not be good.

I think of data visualization as a particular technique for expressing particular types of secrets — specifically, superficial secrets that hide on the surface of things (the secrets of charts and graphs and maps and numbers). These are easy secrets, so most data visualization is quite shallow, expressively speaking.
There are other types of secrets — I call them “inner secrets” — and these secrets cannot be touched by data visualization. These inner secrets have to do with the heart or soul or subtle essence of things, and they can only be accessed through solitude, contemplation and personal experience. After making a number of data-based projects I became conscious of this limitation, and so recently I have turned more towards real experience (i.e. The Whale Hunt, Balloons of Bhutan, Today), to try to access these other types of secrets. They are much harder to find, but much richer when you actually find them, because they are things that other people can use to deepen their understanding of their own lives. As an artist, if you stumble upon one of these secrets, it is an incredible gift to you and to others, and it can make for very powerful work.

I was interested in your statement that the beauty of ‘beautiful data’ comes from the data itself — that some data is intrinsically beautiful, or at least more interesting, than other data. And I was fascinated to hear that you and Sep, when making We Feel Fine, set out in the first instance to identify beautiful data. I have to ask — how do you decide if data is beautiful or not? What are the aesthetic criteria you bring to bear on raw data? How do you know beautiful data when you see it?

You have to feel it in your gut. There’s no checklist, and even if there were a checklist, it would quickly become obsolete, because it has something to do with originality and strangeness. You have to find data that people have never seen before, but which feels totally familiar when they see it, like you’re showing people a part of themselves. This is the kind of data that feels beautiful. It is illuminating, surprising and personally resonant. I’m always searching for things that are simultaneously familiar and strange — those are the most powerful things.

Much of your work is about providing your audience with a tool — a software application. How can we reconcile use value with aesthetic value? What happens for example when somebody goes to We Feel Fine and starts interrogating the system — looking for women feeling wistful or whatever — because we’ve got quite a complicated thing going on here — we’ve got you and Sep as the artists, giving the audience — me — the opportunity to connect with a lot of other people in ways which are really quite interesting. So, where’s the art? Where is the art situated within this complex set of interrelationships?

The art is the whole thing — all of it.

We Feel Fine is a piece of portraiture with many interacting elements. Visual aesthetics are only a very small part — probably the least interesting part. It is more about creating an ever-changing portrait of the emotional landscape of the human world. It is about creating a two-way mirror — where viewers simultaneously experience a God-like voyeurism (spying on the feelings of others) and a bashful vulnerability (realizing their own words and pictures are in there, too). When these two feelings mix together (voyeurism and vulnerability), the hope is that they produce a kind of humbling empathy — demonstrating that individual experiences are actually universal.

Another interesting aspect of We Feel Fine is mass authorship. There are now over 14 million feelings in the database, coming from about 4 million individuals, and they deserve to be authors of the piece as much as me and Sep. If the sentences in We Feel Fine (written by others) were not so poignant, the piece would be much weaker — it would be less about humanity and more about the impressive acrobatics of data visualization (which would be a selfish, superficial, short-lived goal). We Feel Fine is now more than five years old, but it still feels quite contemporary, and I believe this timelessness comes from the candor of the sentences, not from the way it is designed. Beautiful self-expression is timeless.

The notion of mass authorship is a fascinating one — and absolutely central to what you do. One can almost think of it as the defining preoccupation of your oeuvre — this balancing of your authorial voice (which is always very clear) and the contributions of thousands and thousands of anonymous collaborators, each with a voice of their own. Now, this is not something which is unique to your work — it’s also arguably the defining preoccupation of the age we live in — the shift from the few-to-many broadcast model of communication to a peer-to-peer model where authorship is much more diffuse and widely shared — but also messier, less coherent, less consistent.

Did you set out to do work which has this over arching contemporary resonance? Is this important to you?

Back in 2003, when I was working with you at Fabrica, I remember feeling how non-special I was, and how silly it would be to encapsulate my own particular thoughts and opinions in my work, and how it would be much better to harvest and incorporate the thoughts and opinions of millions of others. Just as I thought I wasn’t special, I also thought that no one else was special, so the only sane thing seemed to be to put everyone on equal ground, with equal voice, and that some kind of ‘universal truth’ would emerge from that. This is similar to the idea of the Internet as a global brain, where people are interchangeable and individuals don’t matter — only the aggregate matters.
Back in 2003, I was enamored with this idea. I think it appealed to the insecure
geek in me, who liked the idea that I could learn all there was to know about life
from sitting at my desk and designing clever programs — the ultimate revenge
of the nerd!

Now I think this approach is deeply flawed, very limited, and dangerous to us
as individuals, even as it grows in popularity and acceptance (wisdom of the
crowds, etc.).

When people are viewed in the aggregate, individual humans matter less and
less, and when systems are designed to deal with the aggregate, those systems
become damaging to individuals. As such systems grow in scale and adoption,
you start to see the mass homogenization of human identity (everyone filling
out the same profiles, choosing from the same dropdown menus, etc.), which
is what we’re seeing today in the digital world.

The idea that you can learn about life from data is wrong. The only way to learn
about life is from life (but this truth is terrifying to programmers, who prefer to
sit at desks).

That is why now, I am much more interested in working from real life —
incorporating my own personal experience (*The Whale Hunt, Today*, etc.)
and designing platforms to activate other people’s real personal experience
(*Cowbird*) — than in passively harvesting large data sets, as I did in my
earlier work.

When you interrogate large data sets for universal truths, you end up with a
statistical mush that offers vague, blurry, superficial insights (everyone falls in
love, everyone gets mad, everyone eats breakfast, etc.). When you’re hunting
down the universal, the best approach is actually to study the specific and
extrapolate — in that way, any insights you find will be grounded in something
real. The personal is powerful.

I have always been quite OCD as a person (it runs in my family), and probably
the main impulse in my life has been to try to control life’s chaos by spotting
patterns and organizing the noise all around me. In my personal life I do this with
plans, lists, routines and projects, and I think you can see this impulse carried
over into my work.

With *We Feel Fine*, I saw so many different interesting sides of the data —
ranging from emotive to analytical — and I could not choose just one at the
expense of all the others. So there are six movements that each explore a
different aspect of the data:

1) “Montage” lets you see photos of real people — this is the most human and
empathetic part of the piece.

2) “Madness” mimics the feeling of living in a large city and constantly shifting
between total anonymity and extreme intimacy, and what that changing of
emotional scales does to an individual — I was living in NYC when I designed
that movement, and it really encapsulates how I was feeling living there.

3) “Murmurs” allows you to be passive and witness a scrolling wall of human
expression — the Godlike experience begins here.

4) “Mobs” is a whimsical way to introduce the idea of statistics into a storytelling
context, without being too technical — the God like sense is back, here in the
form of numbers, appealing to the popular belief that “only if I have enough data,
then I will understand” (which is a deeply flawed belief).

5) “Metrics” appeals to the hyper-rational, analytical mind — humans are just
numbers now.

6) “Mounds” is a playful way of summarizing an entire database — the individual
sentences are most abstracted here.

So the movements range from God-like voyeurism / emotional mind, to
God-like omniscience / rational mind, but again, together, trying to produce a
weird kind of empathy for the human condition, so that viewers end up feeling
less like Gods and more like humans.

I’m interested in the notion of sense or meaning in your work, the way in which
it appears to be trying to make sense of very large and very complicated sets of
data. Linked to this is the idea of ‘movements’ in *We Feel Fine* as different kinds
of sense or meaning — from the initial madness of “Madness”, with the mass
represented as a proper mass, without meaning, chaotic and messy, through
“Murmurs”, “Montage”, “Mobs”, “Metrics” and “Mounds”. Each one is giving a
different perspective on the data, a different slice. And each has a very different
aesthetic feel about it. What were you trying to do here?
You’ve spoken in the past about surveillance and self exposure. Your work seems to be about a kind of poetics of surveillance, finding patterns, creating beauty out of this enormous mass of self-published material.

Yes, I think there is some of that. I’m not so interested in surveillance as such, in any kind of Orwellian way — at least not like some other artists are. For me, surveillance is like data visualization — another contemporary tool we have in our culture, which we can use as artists to say things about our world. Surveillance gets a bad rap (CIA, wiretapping, etc.), but surveillance can also be used to uncover incredible beauty. It can be used to humanize — not just dehumanize — individuals.

It’s curious that you see surveillance as ambiguous — neither good nor bad — but as something which can affirm humanity. In this respect it becomes a kind of anthropology — and a technique for you to uncover humanity and beauty.

How do you go about this — I mean what kind of technical decisions do you make to uncover beauty? I guess this connects back to ideas about whether a particular set of data is intrinsically beautiful or not. So, there are ridiculously large amounts of data out there — and you have to make a decision about which subset of it you’re interested in. How do you make that decision? I guess I’m interested in how you work with data, in the way other artists work with pigment, or movement, or words or whatever.

I usually start by deciding what kind of thing I want to make a project about (news, emotion, my own life, etc.), and then I think through all the different aspects of that thing that might leave behind a data trail. Then I start wandering through those data trails, and I see what the data looks like. What I’m looking for is something surprising — some weird pattern, some repetition, something that makes me gasp, something I didn’t know, something I haven’t seen, some strange subtext, etc. I often build analytical tools to help with this process, especially to look for patterns. You start to get a feeling for whether something’s going to be interesting or not, and if it looks interesting, then you go deeper.

For the projects that involve real experience (The Whale Hunt, Balloons of Bhutan, Today), the process is flipped on its head, because I have to decide beforehand what kind of data I’m going to collect as I go through the experience (temperature, heartbeat, certain questions, etc.). This approach is more about hacking reality and developing hypotheses about which hacks are likely to be interesting. Then I go and put myself in those situations, to see what happens. This is more risky, because you never really know if something will be interesting until you try it.

In both cases, the visual design of the final piece comes much later.

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Your work lives on the Internet. Why a gallery show? How does the work differ — online and real world?

I love the Internet as an art platform. I love its openness, ubiquity, accessibility, scale and permanence. I also love the lack of gatekeepers. However, one problem with presenting a body of work on the Internet is the fragmented, schizophrenic, piecemeal thing the work ends up becoming. My various projects are scattered across dozens of websites living at different domains, written in a handful of programming languages, some still collecting data, others frozen in time, and others offline entirely. This makes it very difficult for a viewer (or even for me) to get a sense of the body of work as a whole. I found that seeing the work all together in a gallery has given me a very different sense of it. It feels much more continuous, self-consistent, and slowly evolving than I ever really imagined it to be. I think viewers to the exhibit have the same feeling. Also, we have found that typical visitors to the show are spending 1-2 hours there, while other exhibits at that same gallery usually have visitors spending less than 10 minutes. So there is clearly a tremendous interest for this kind of work to be seen in an art context. The problem is mainly that the art establishment has not yet found a way to think about it and welcome it (not to mention sell it), so it remains largely fringe — a thing of the Web, but not of the “serious” art world.

One of my goals in doing this show was to offer up my work to the art world, to see if it can even have a presence there, or whether I should forget about the art world and just keep publishing my work online. The show has tremendous appeal among the public, but it’s unclear what the impact (if any) will be in the art world.

Why do you think electronic art and net art is so disconnected from the broader fine art scene? Do you think this will ever change? Does it matter?

I think people in the art world (especially critics) like to feel elite, like they understand things the rest of us don’t. To get anything out of most “good” (i.e. critically acclaimed) contemporary art, you have to have a tremendous amount of domain knowledge or an MFA. This keeps the critics employed, so they can explain the art to the rest of us. With a lot of digital work (including my work), this explanation is not really necessary. Pretty much anyone can understand one of my projects pretty much immediately (which has always been one of my goals). There’s a lot of complexity hiding in them, but it’s pretty easy to see what’s going on right away. I think this approachability scares critics, because there’s not much for them to add to the dialogue.

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This kind of work, when it’s done well, doesn’t require tour guides. I think critics feel threatened by it, so they try to avoid it, and say it’s not art, so they don’t have to deal with it.

If digital art were less understandable, more obscure, more abstract, and did more to reference other existing artworks, critics would probably like it more, because they would have more to say about it. But it’s unclear whether this would actually be good for the work — probably not.

Do you think it’s possible — or desirable — to be an artist who works solely on the Internet?

One hard thing is how to make money. The art world is premised on the fetishization and selling of scarce objects. The Internet (and my work) is based on abundance. Indeed, websites are often judged by their number of viewers. An artwork’s price is unrelated to its number of viewers. A priceless Picasso can hang over the sofa of a hedge fund manager, 100 people will see it a year, and it will still be a priceless Picasso. So there needs to be a new economic model for artists working online, otherwise they will work elsewhere.

Another problem with the Internet is the glazed-over, “I am looking at a screen now” mindset that people go into when they are staring into a monitor and clicking with their mouse. This deadened, distracted, passive mindset (largely brought about by addictive social networking tools) is not conducive to having deep personal experiences, whether with art or anything else. When I see visitors in a gallery looking at one of my pieces, I can see they are having a deeply personal experience — they are very present, in the moment. When they are at home with their laptops, I am not so sure.

As an artist, I am actually moving away from the Internet. I have been doing more work in the physical world, involving strange personal experiences, largely because life is short and I don’t want to spend my whole life sitting behind a screen, and there is much to learn from the real world!

Ultimately, I am not interested in the Internet as a subject. I am interested in real people and real experience as subjects. The Internet is just a place where real people gather, and where real experiences are documented, so it can be a good proxy for this kind of portraiture.

Also, it’s a great distribution medium. But no, I’m not married to it.

Tell me about *The Whale Hunt*. It’s different from the other pieces. It’s a story. It’s time-based, it’s a sequence. So, how can data-mining work together with narrative sequence? Is there a contradiction here - between what linguists used to call the paradigm — the set of possibilities, and the syntagm — the sequence of items strung together to form meaning?

*The Whale Hunt* was really about putting myself in the position of the computer, and assigning myself an algorithm to follow as a program would. After creating so many projects that required computers to follow rules incessantly, I thought it would be good to gain some empathy for the computer, kind of like an energy executive spending some time in the mines, digging up coal, to understand what his business is really about.

So for *The Whale Hunt*, I took photographs at 5-minute intervals for 8 days, and then more frequently when my heartbeat went up, producing 3,214 photographs in all. Once collected, I tagged and classified these photos in a number of different ways, and only then did I create a program to surface the hidden connections between these photographs — connections like color, people, themes, time, adrenaline level, etc.

To me, this is a really interesting and quite unexplored area — using computers to process real human experience and come to a deeper understanding of it. It is like computer-assisted contemplation, or machine-based meditation. I am actually not sure if this can work, but I am interested in trying.

With computers so much is possible, so as artists we really have to ask ourselves, “WHY am I doing what I am doing? Is it just to show off? To show what a good programmer I am? To show how pretty I can make the swirly thing flying around the screen? To show how pretty I can make that generic data set look?” These are the wrong reasons for making things. Instead, we have to ask, “What does this thing give to others? How is this thing improving me as a person? How can I see something no one else can see, and how can I communicate it in a beautiful way? What kind of world do I want to see, and how can I help make it?” These are the kind of questions artists need to ask, but digital artists in particular seem to have trouble asking these questions, because they think the questions are questions for poets and philosophers, not technologists. But if more technologists thought of themselves as poets and philosophers, then very different types of software would begin to emerge, and that software would help to shape the emerging digital world, and keep it from turning into a shopping mall (if it hasn’t already).
I'm very curious about Cowbird - which as far as I understand, also connects narrative and data-mining in new and innovative ways.

I don't want to talk too much about Cowbird now, except to say that it is a storytelling platform for others to use to tell stories of any size — from The War in Iraq, to My Day At The Beach. It generalizes many of the principles explored in my earlier works (maps, charts, graphs, timelines, themes, people, simple playful design, etc.), and incorporates them into a storytelling tool that non-programmers can use to tell beautiful interactive narratives. I've been working on it for almost two years, and it's nearly ready to share.

It is new for me in many ways, but mainly because it directly involves other people. All of my other works are basically portraits, in one way or another, but Cowbird is a tool that people use directly. There are all sorts of considerations in tool-making that you don't need to make in portraiture. I've always liked Golan Levin's maxim, "To make tools that are instantly knowable and infinitely masterable — like the pencil and the piano." I've been keeping that rule in mind designing Cowbird, but it is very hard!

There have been no masterpieces of digital art — or so you famously said at Flash on the Beach two years ago. You also said most digital work failed to move you, that much of it is unemotional. Do you still think this is true? And if so, why should this be?

As for masterpieces — I'm not sure. I guess masterpieces only fully reveal themselves with time, and that the definition of a masterpiece is precisely something that remains relevant over time. But I do still think that in general, digital art occupies an awkward adolescence, still groping around for exactly what it should be, and that the only way to grow out of this awkward adolescence is to make projects that deal with big themes, or that deal with small themes in a big way. Basically, digital artists need to make more serious work. Experimenting and tinkering are great to learn the tools, but once you learn the tools, then you have to use the tools to say something, and the saying something is much harder (but ultimately much more important). It's the only way to break through the digital ghetto and into the mainstream world.

As for digital works failing to touch me — this is something I think about a lot. I think part of the problem (and I mentioned this earlier) is how computer programming is removed from the original act of self-expression, in a way that paint and words are not. My friend Rob, who founded Etsy.com, used to ask me how I could be a digital artist, and whether I had found a way to channel my real personal experience / suffering / whatever into writing code.

I don't think I have found a way to do that. When I am really upset, or feeling other very strong emotions, it might help me to write or to draw or to paint, but the last thing I want to do is to write code, I think because writing code requires a suppression of my humanity. It's like, in order to write good code, I have to become a bad (unfeeling) person, and to become a good (feeling) person, I have to stop writing code. It is a tradeoff. And I feel this tradeoff very intensely when I go from a few weeks of traveling and writing and photographing, and then I sit down and try to write code again. I can feel the spiritual resistance, because somehow my soul knows that I am a better person when I am not writing code, and it is trying to urge me not to do it again. But as I stubbornly do it (and it usually takes a few days to get back into it) I can feel my living, breathing, human side (really, my body and senses), slowly atrophying and ultimately going away almost entirely.

Writing small computer programs is fun and easy, but writing large programs, with tens or hundreds of thousands of lines of code, is very hard. You have to keep the whole program in your mind at once, and as the program gets large, it takes up more and more of your mind, and you have no space left for anything but the program. It is like a transferral of empathy — from humans to the program. This process always makes me sad, but I do it anyway, because I like what you can make with code.

Anyway, this is something that has been on my mind a lot lately, and I'm not sure which side of it I'll end up choosing.

Programming might not be emotional in the romantic sense of the word emotion, but there are other emotional states linked to the act of programming which are just as important — I'm thinking of the intense sense of losing yourself in the task, the sense that you begin to access a purer realm of abstract thought, which are just as important — I'm thinking of the intense sense of losing yourself in the task, the sense that you begin to access a purer realm of abstract thought, a state of mind which becomes a form of meditation in which time and the body begin to lose their reality.

I've heard this idea from time to time — that programming can help you reach some Zen-like state of concentration and bliss. This is probably true of any task or craft, taken intensely, and not unique to coding, though there is something Oracle-like about staring into a glowing screen. However, I'm not sure that forgetting your body is such a good thing — after all, we are human animals having a physical experience here on earth, and coding can make us forget that. Meditation can make you more present — more conscious of your body and senses — but coding takes you out of your body and senses, out of the earthly present, and into some imaginary realm. I think coding makes you less present.
Further — getting stuck with a snag in the code can be extremely emotionally debilitating and solving a problem in code can be one of the most emotionally joyful and satisfying experiences a person can have (or is that just me?)

Yes, I’ve experienced this “bug / solution / bug” cycle of joy and despair many times, but somehow it’s always felt off to me — like it’s coming from a place of insecurity and neediness, not wholeness and balance. It’s kind of like being in an abusive relationship with a really hot girl who’s actually a total bitch and who treats you like crap, but still you can’t walk away because the highs feel so good and you like the idea of what you can build together.

So, are you saying that for you digital work can’t be emotional and that by extension, a digital masterpiece is...unlikely?

No, I’m not saying that. This medium is very young, and we are still learning how to use it to craft statements and situations that could not exist in any other medium. We’ll get there.