JONATHAN
HARRIS

INNER
LANDSCAPES

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.

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JONATHAN HARRIS: *INNER LANDSCAPES*
Curator's Introduction

"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 conciousness *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.*

Weiner's 64 page pamphlet, *Statements* (1969) embodies this concept, "TWO MINUTES OF SPRAY PAINT DIRECTLY UPON THE FLOOR FROM A STANDARD AEROSOL SPRAY CAN (Nr. 017, 1968)" [Lawrence Weiner: *Statements* (October 12, 1969].

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 realestate 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.

Christopher Thompson
Chief Curator, Firehouse Gallery

SKETCHBOOKS

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 loosing eight months worth of sketchbook entries to a robber in Costa Rica at gun point 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

I WANT YOU

TO WANT ME

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

WHAT I WANT

WHAT I WANT
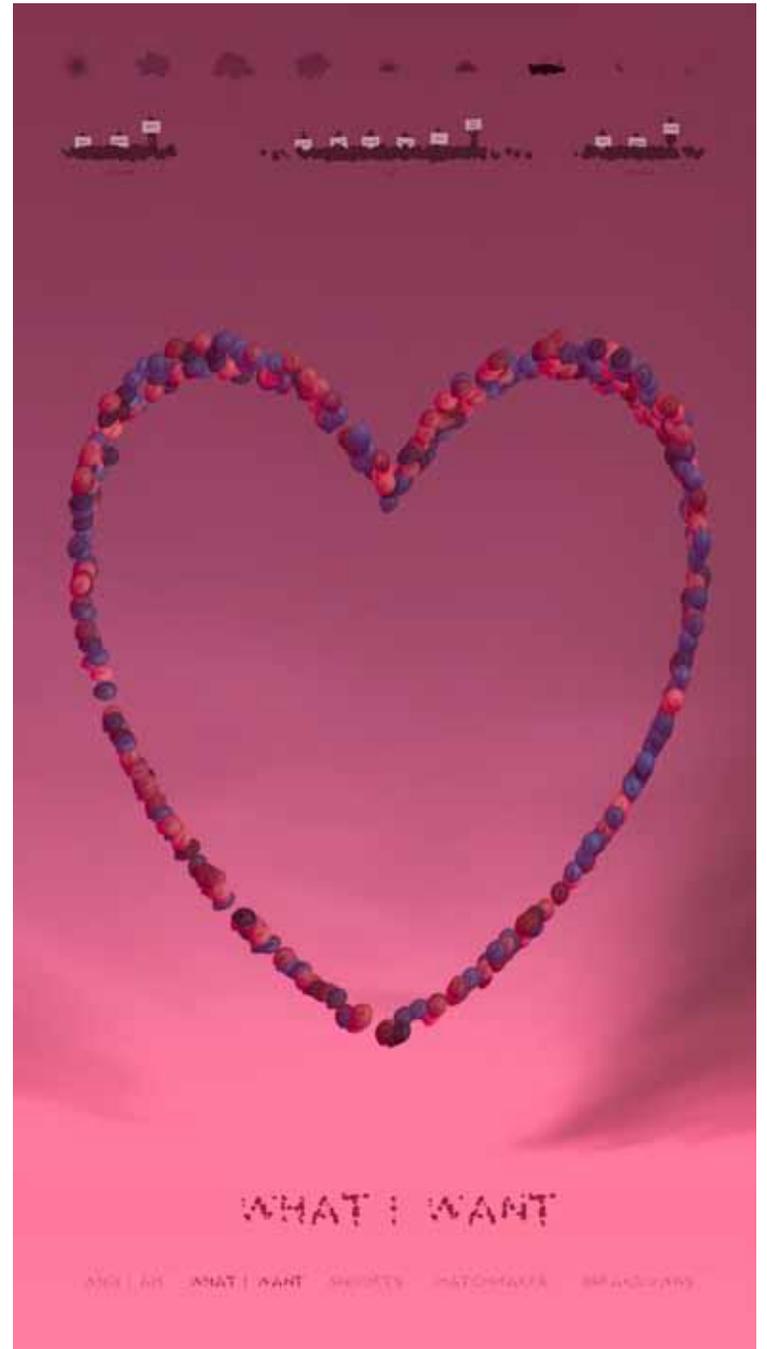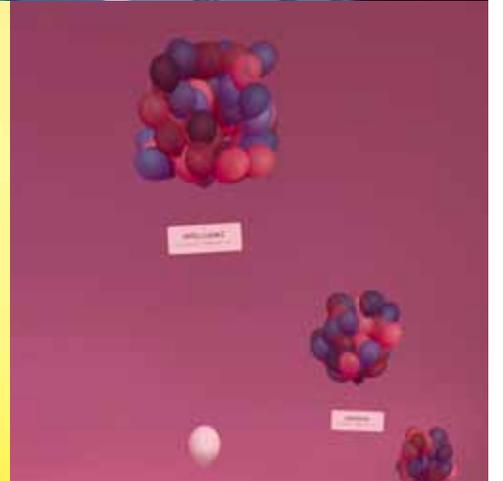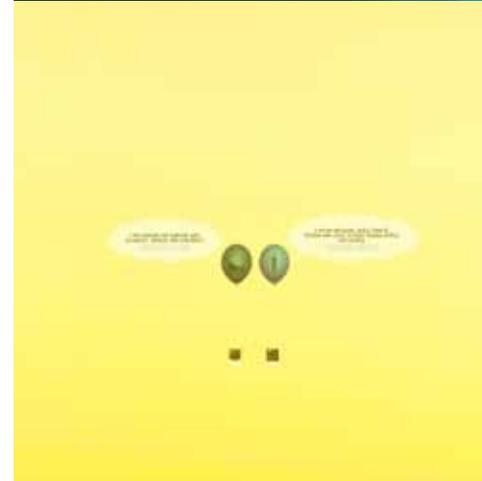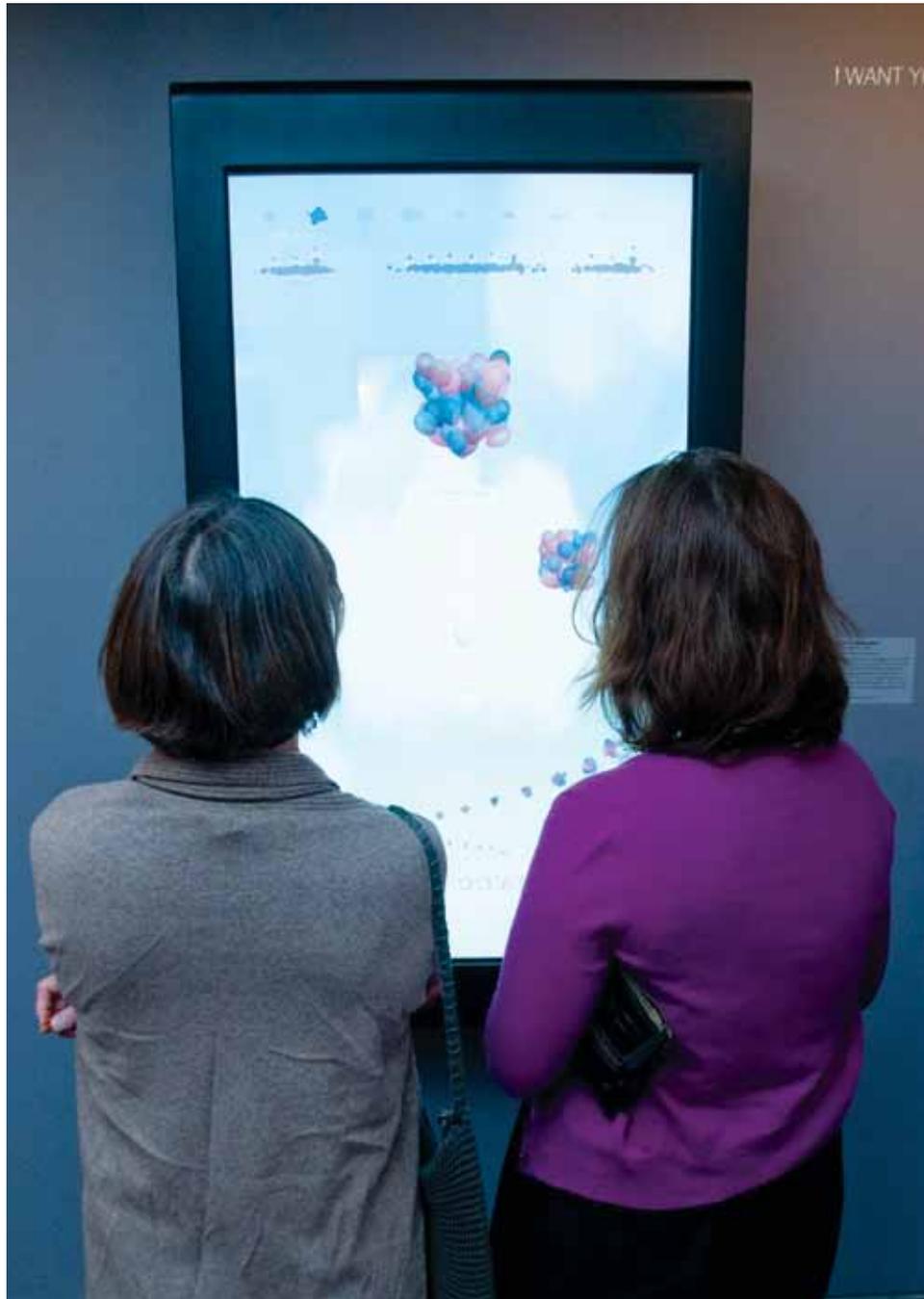
BALOONS   OF BHUTAN

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

WE FEEL FINE

i feel skinny but im not
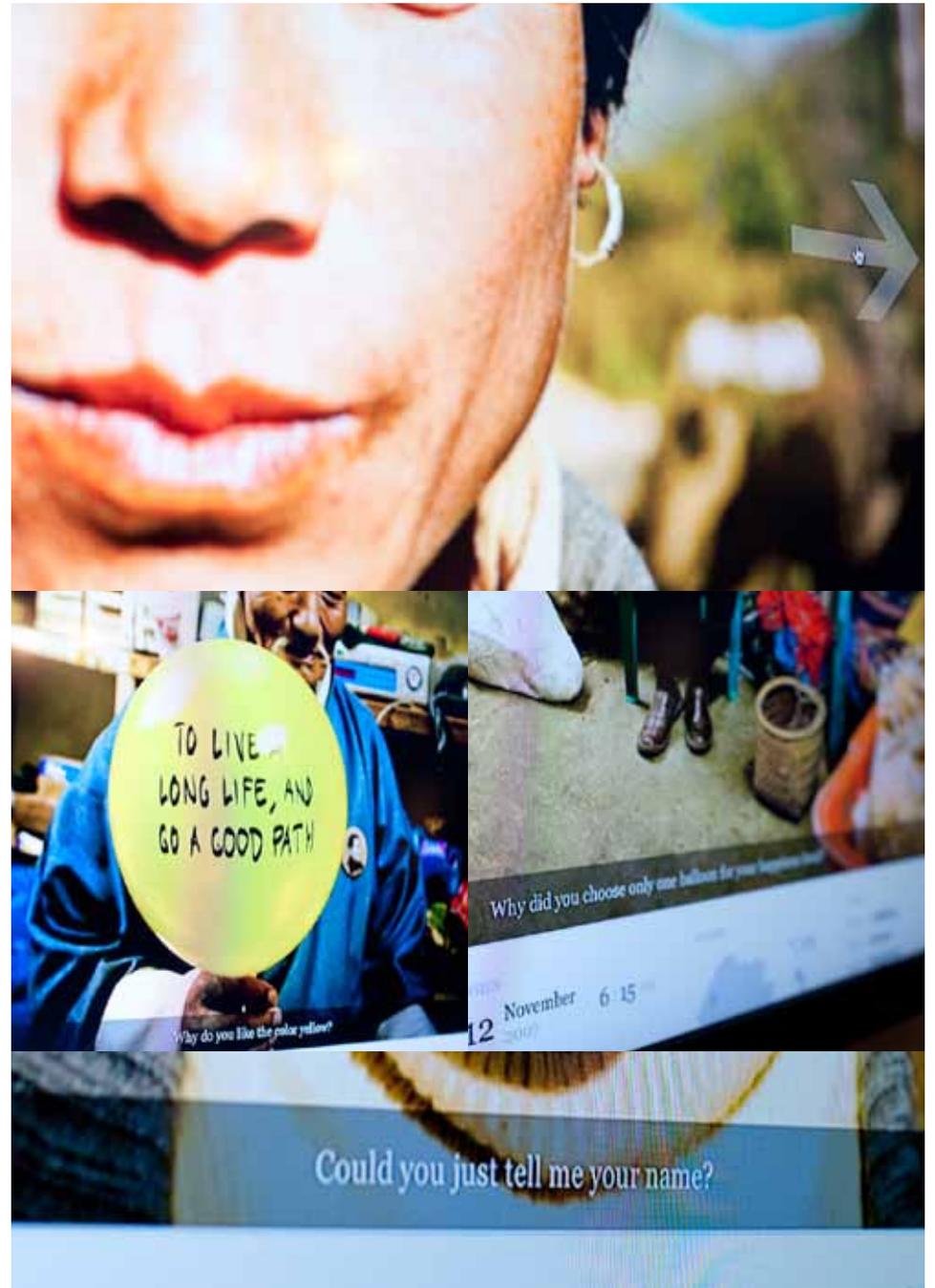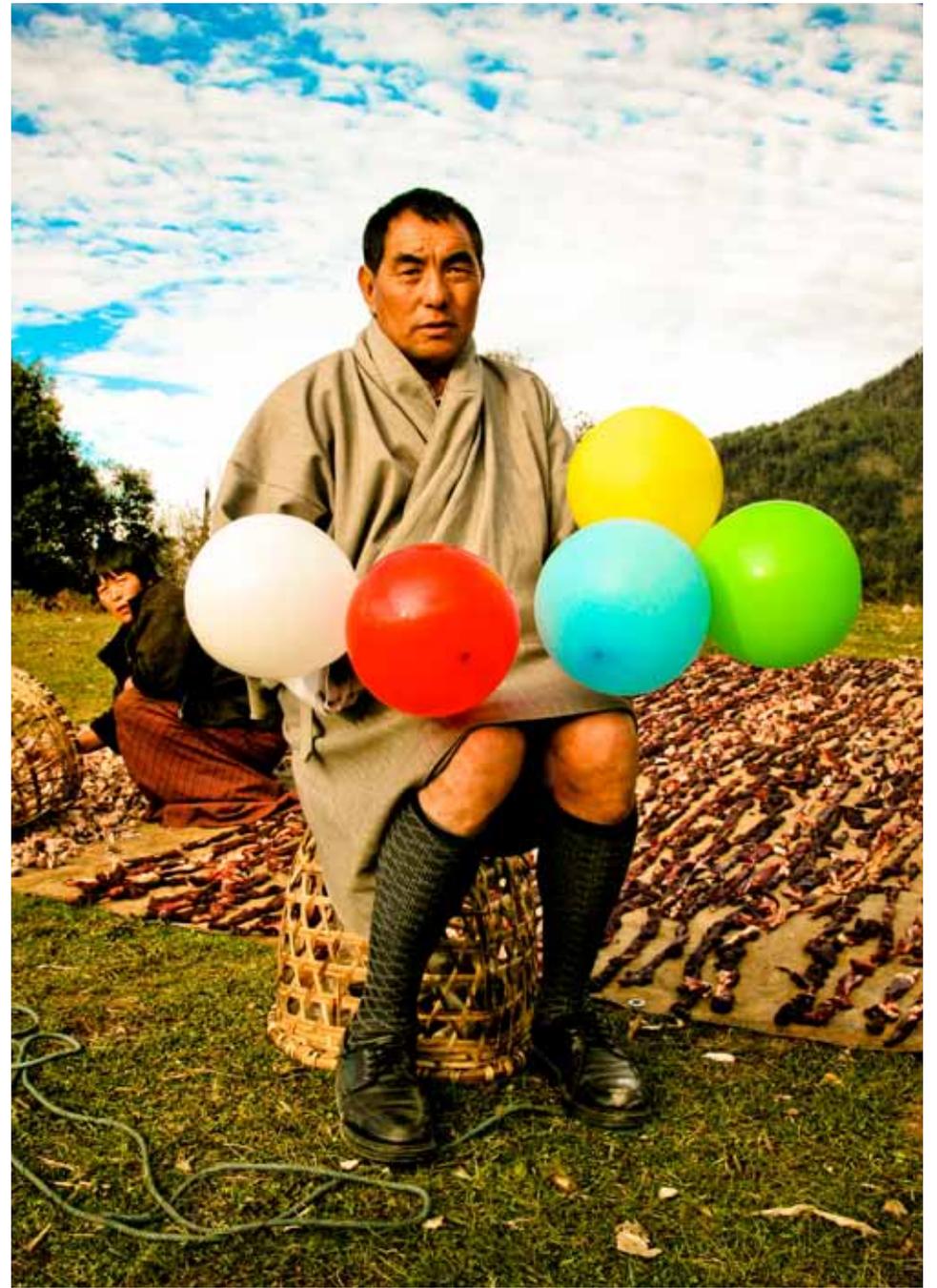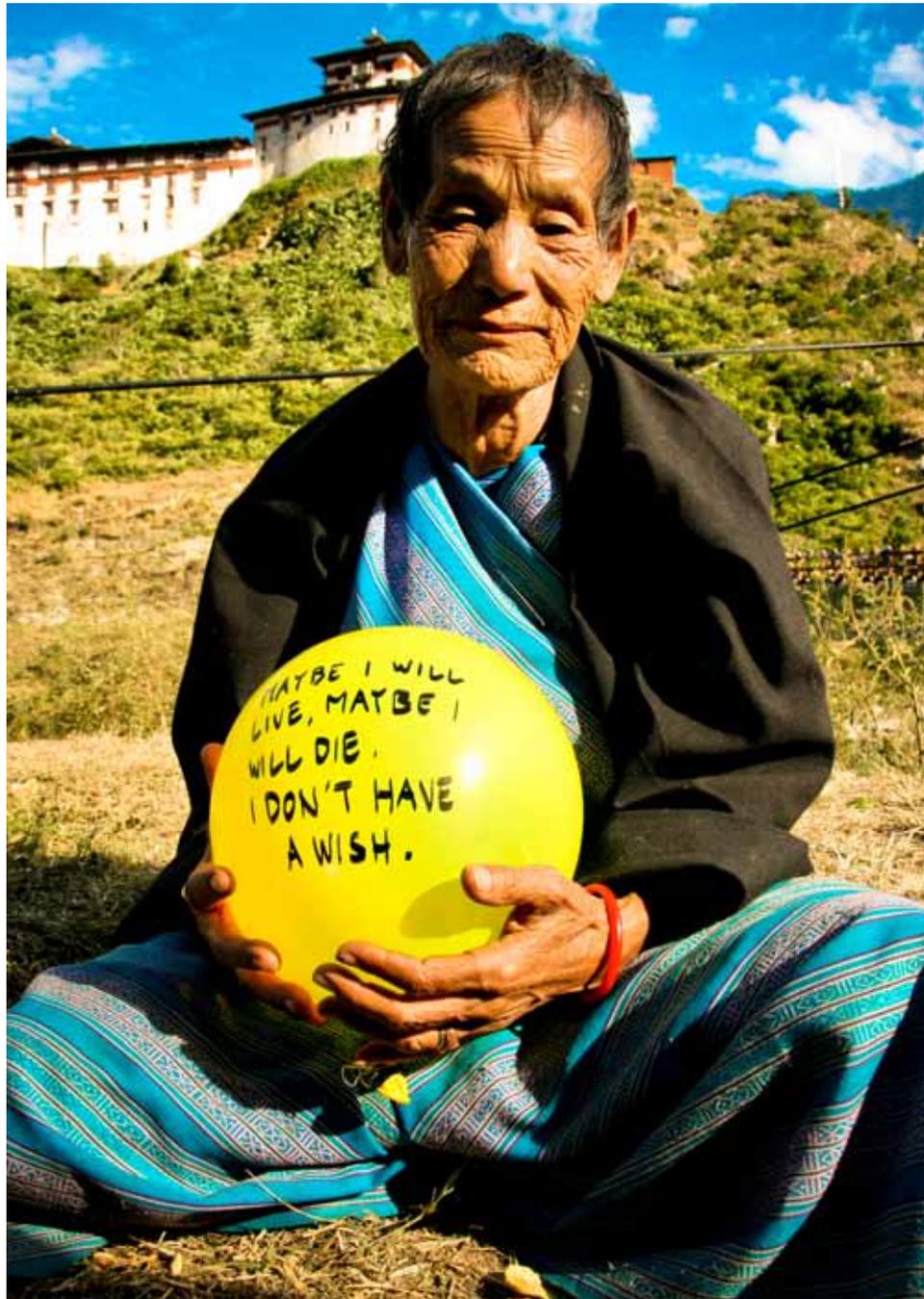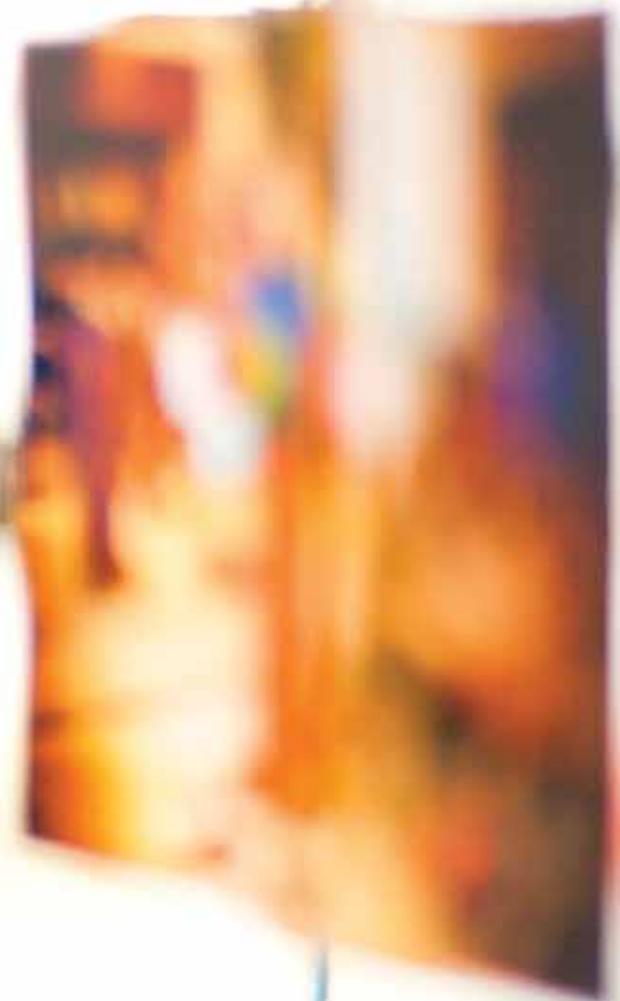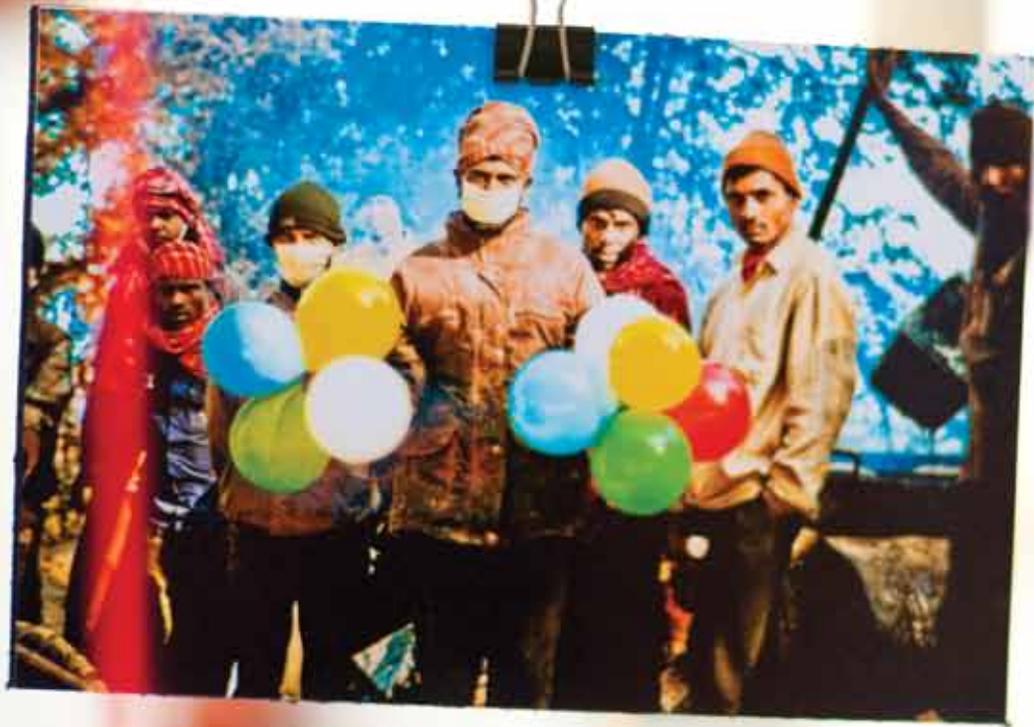
Harris takes a unique artistic approach in his use of data analysis. Engaging the Internet's massive global data-set as a window into human emotion, *We Feel Fine*, searches blog postings for sentences including the phrase "I feel" or "I am feeling". Created in collaboration with Sep Kamvar, *We Feel 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
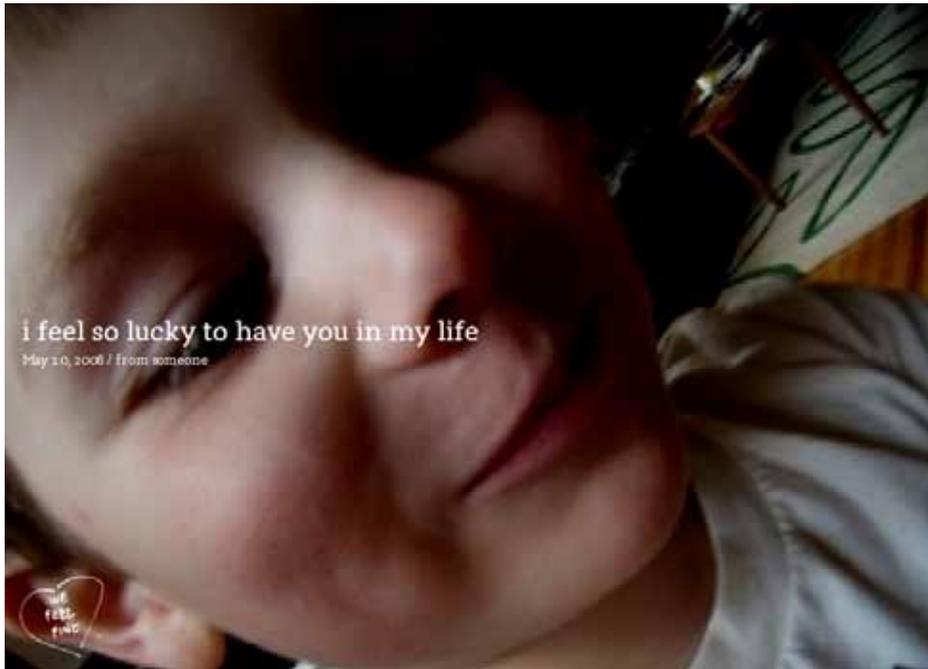
i feel so lucky to have you in my life
May 10, 2006 / from someone
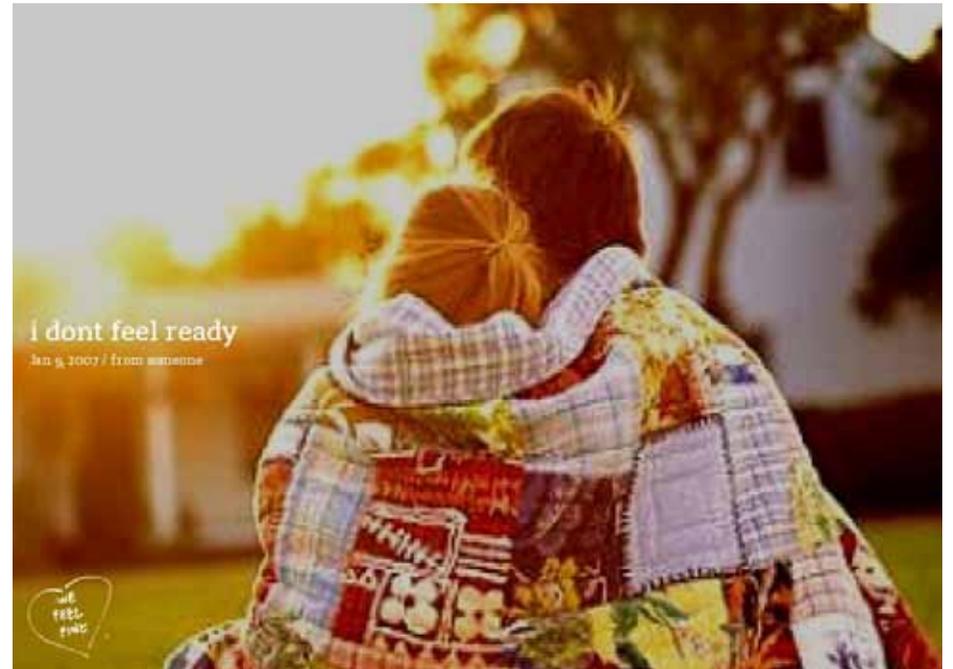
i dont feel ready
Jan 9, 2007 / from someone

i never had a sister much less four of them but i feel like i do now
Apr 29, 2006 / from someone
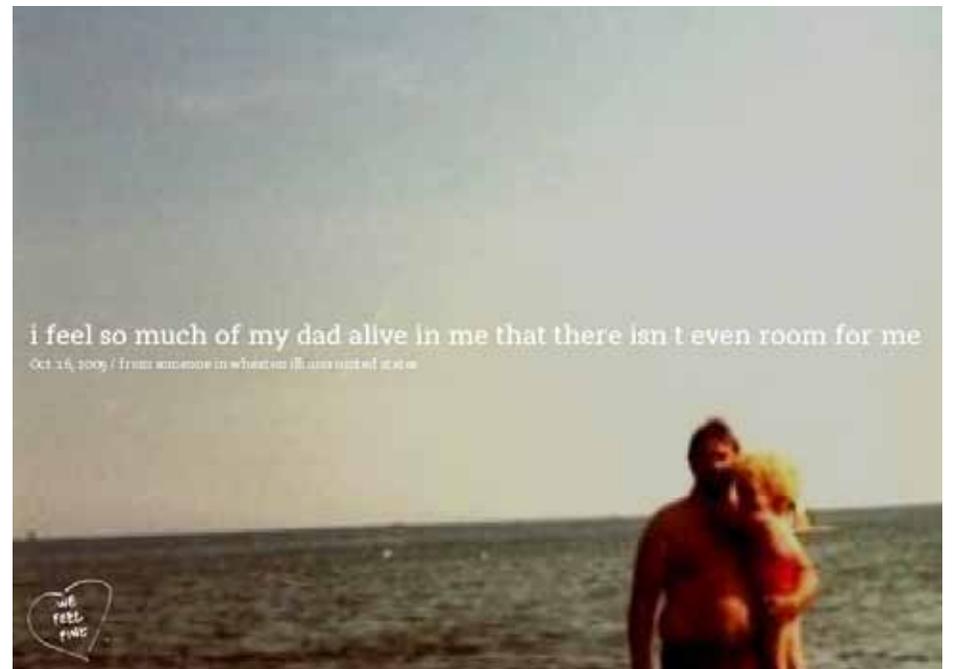
i feel so much of my dad alive in me that there isn t even room for me
Oct 16, 2005 / from someone in wheaton ill usa united states

i feel so sexy in this new wig
Jan 27, 2007 / from someone

i still feel 18
Feb 5, 2007 / from a female

i do not feel that this is limited to little kids
Feb 13, 2007 / from a 21 year old male

i feel like i'm on drugs
May 24, 2006 / from someone in toronto canada when it was cloudy
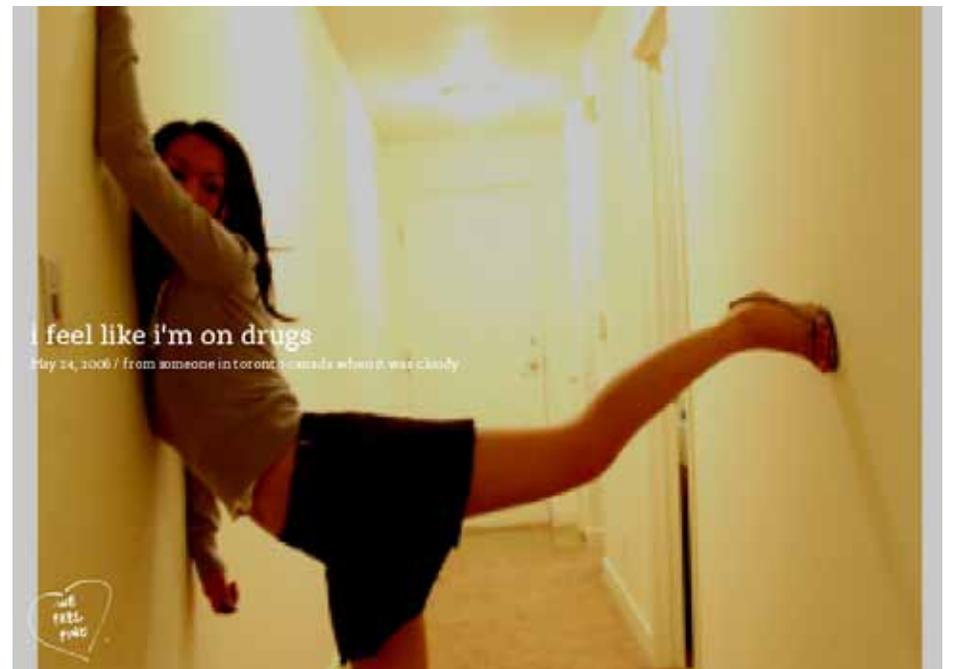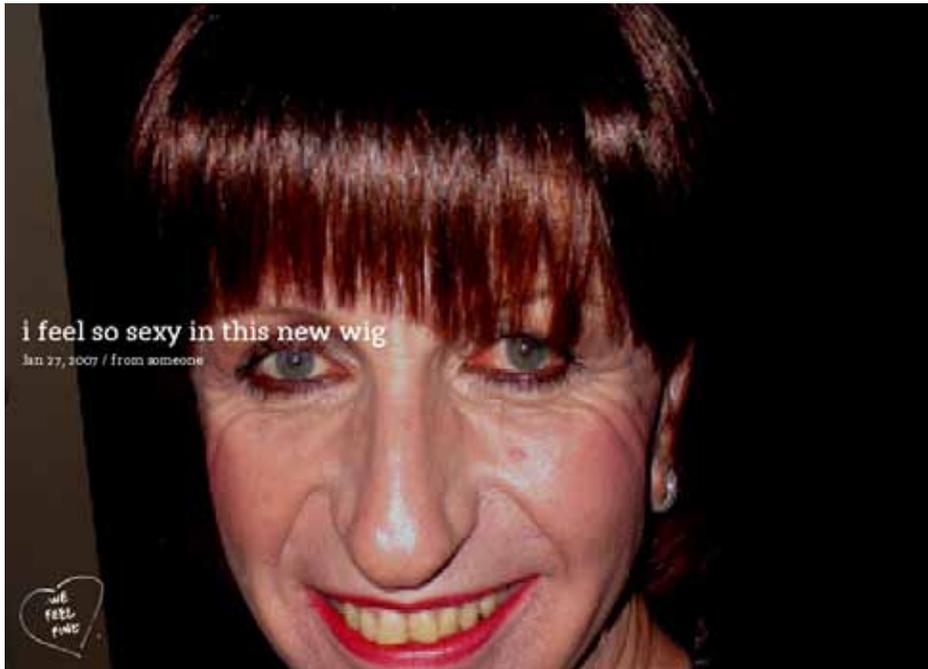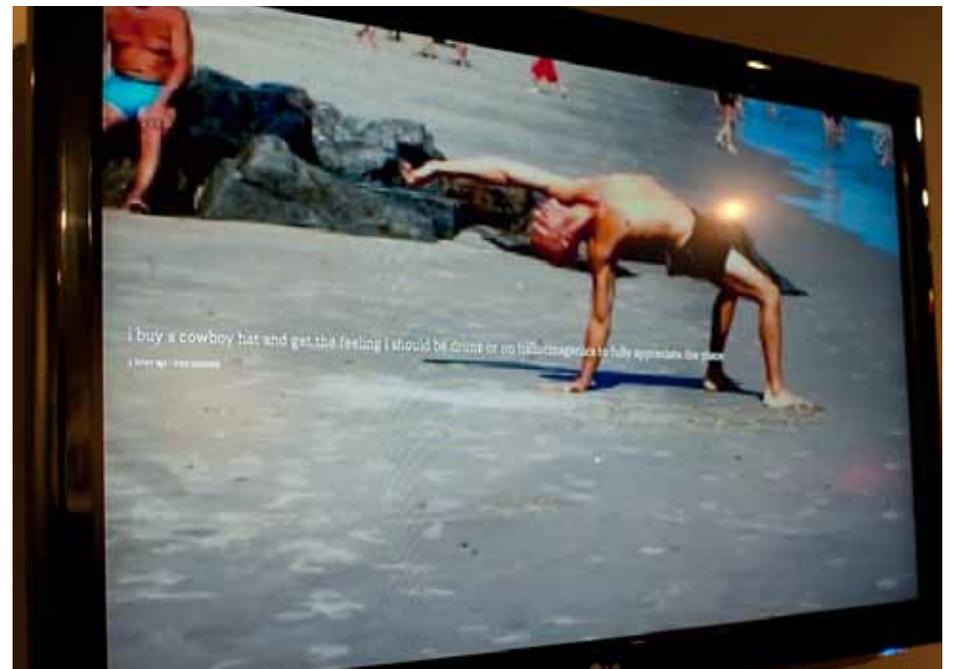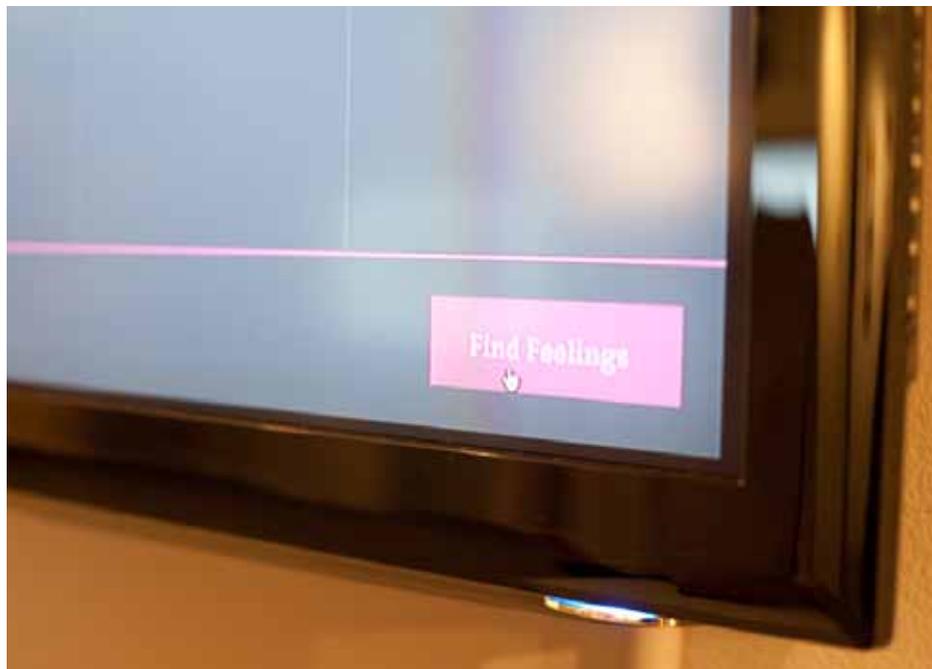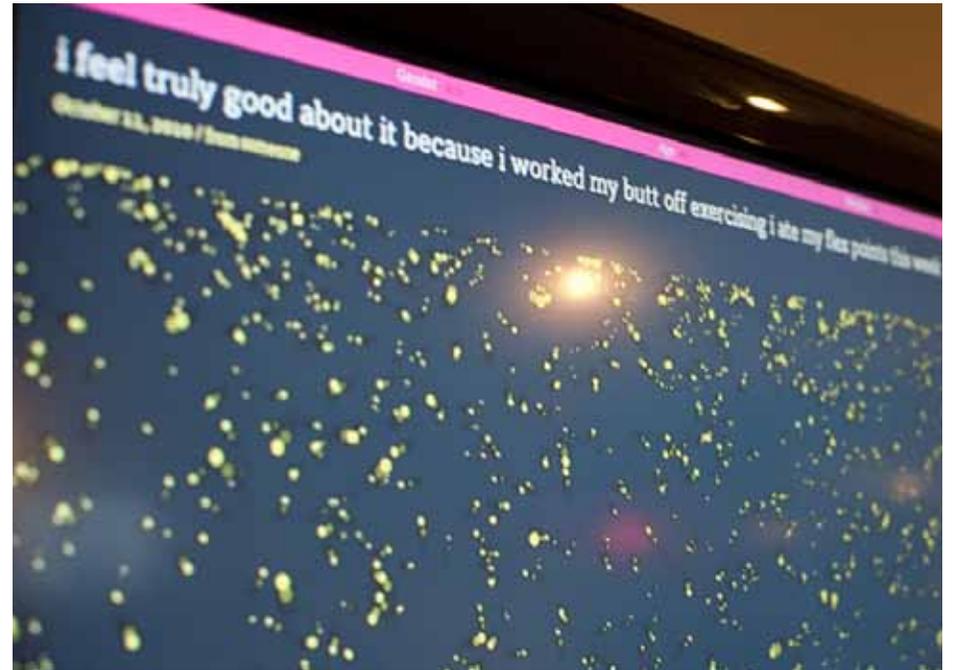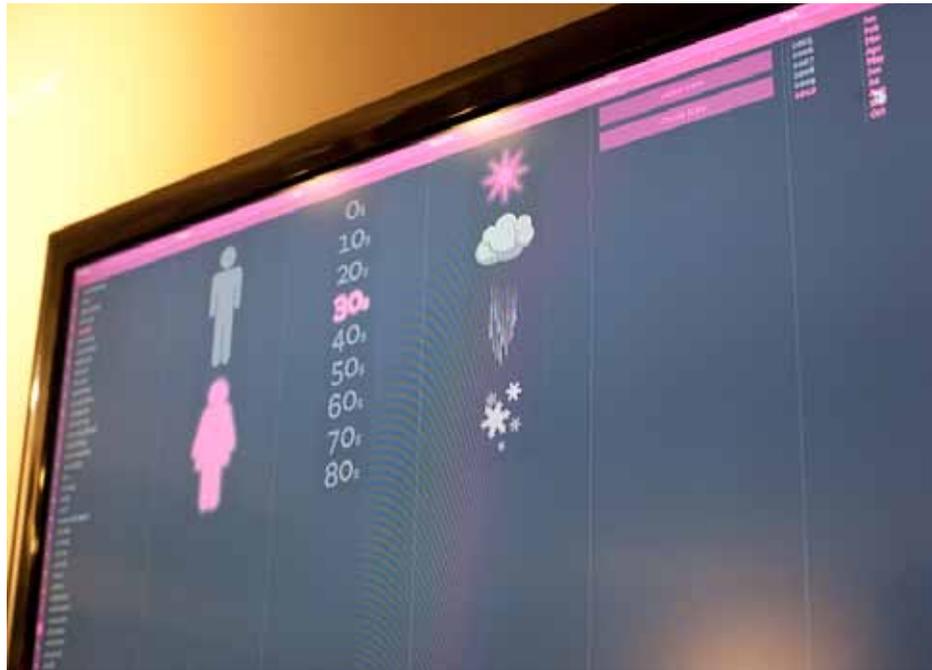
THE WHALE HUNT

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
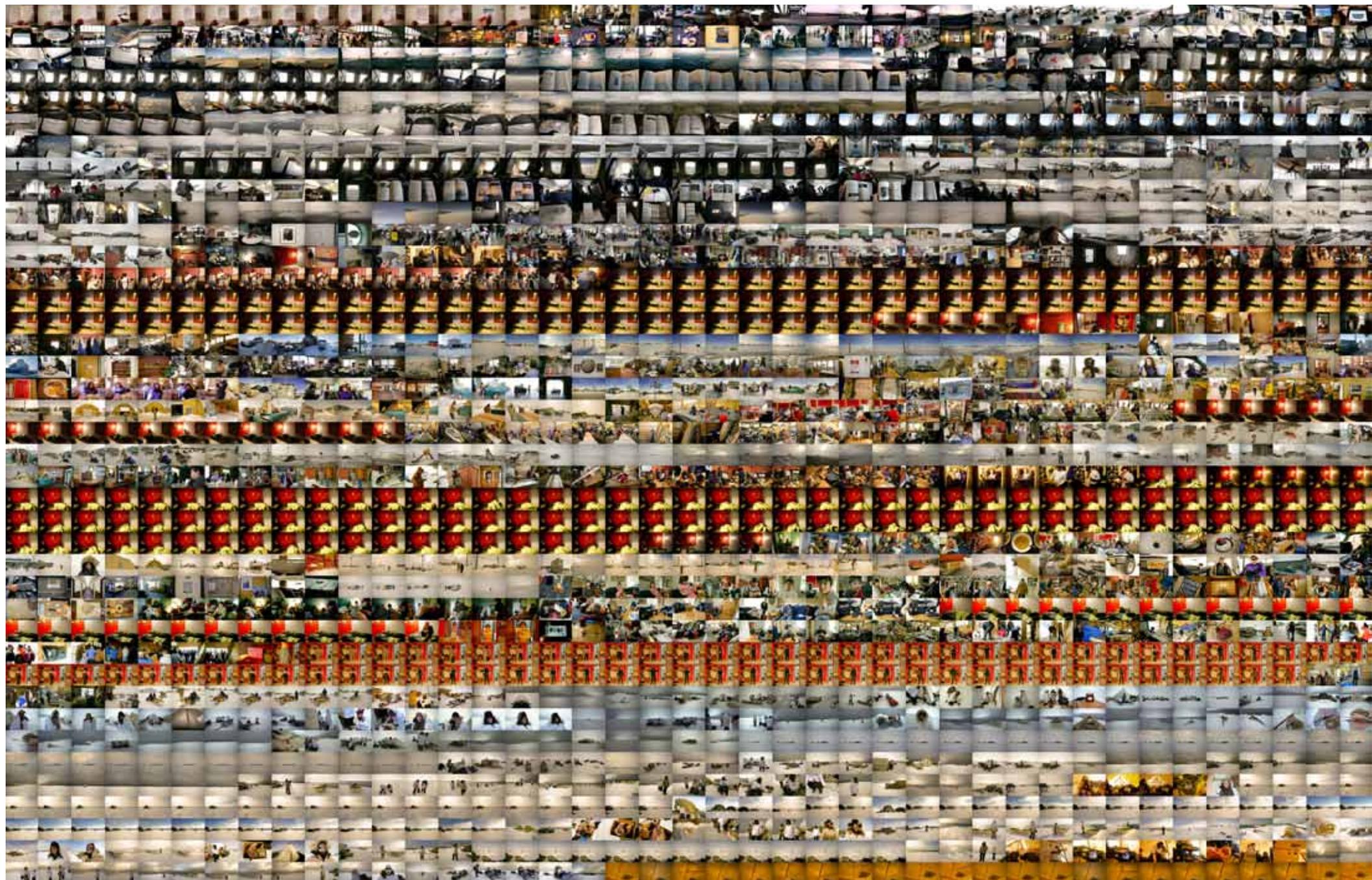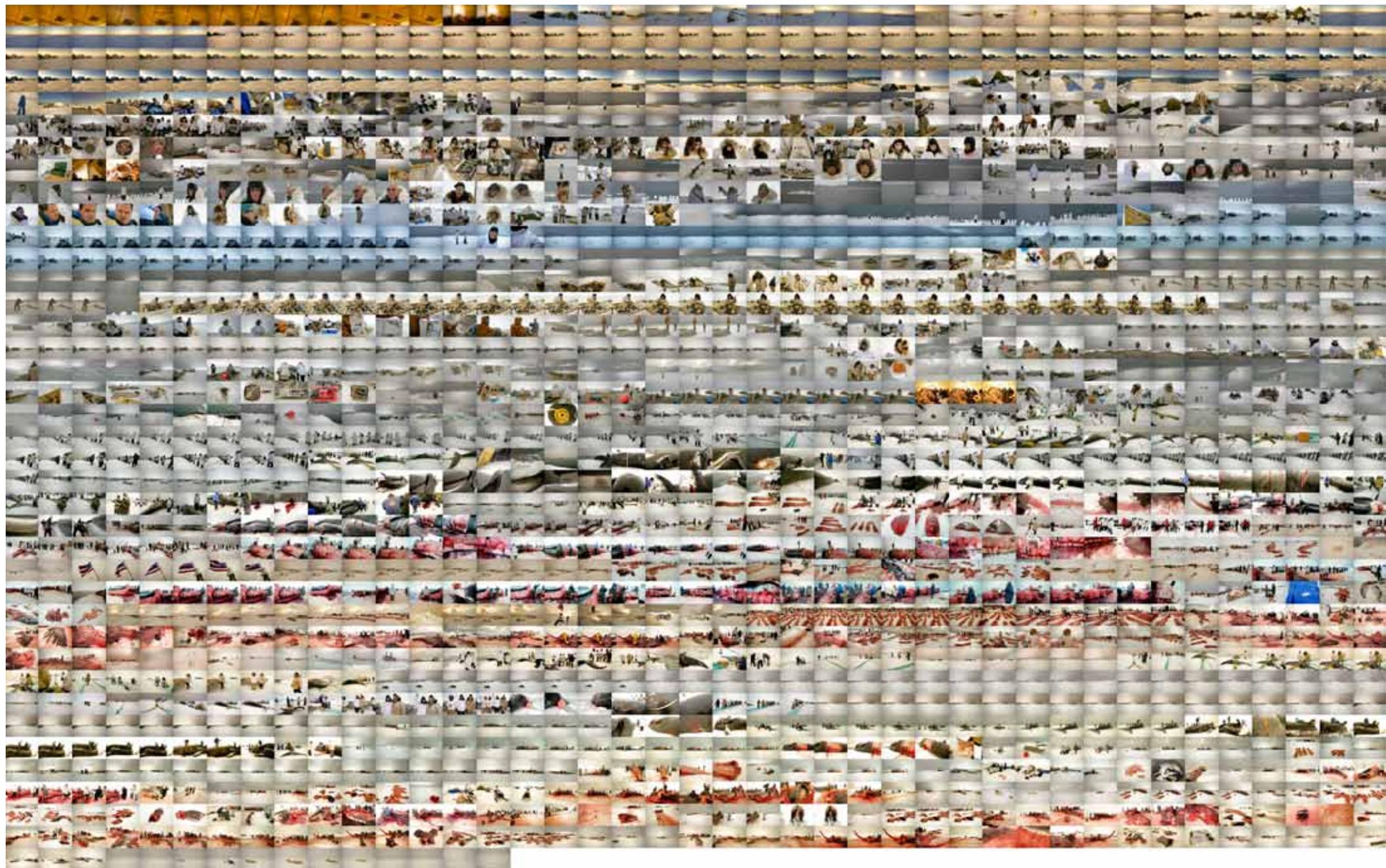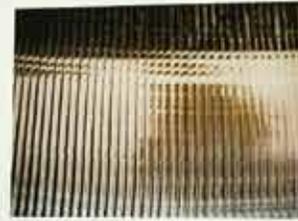
10 x 10

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
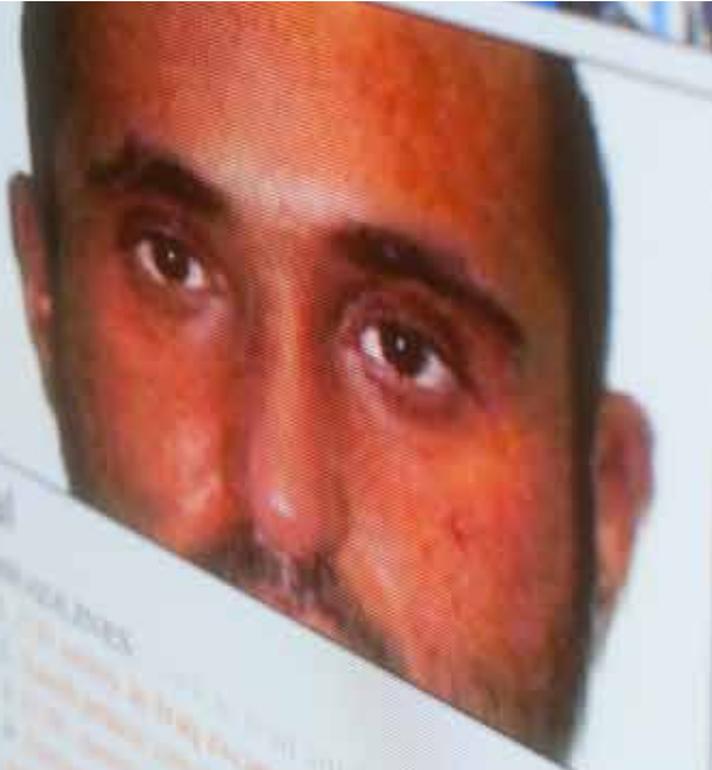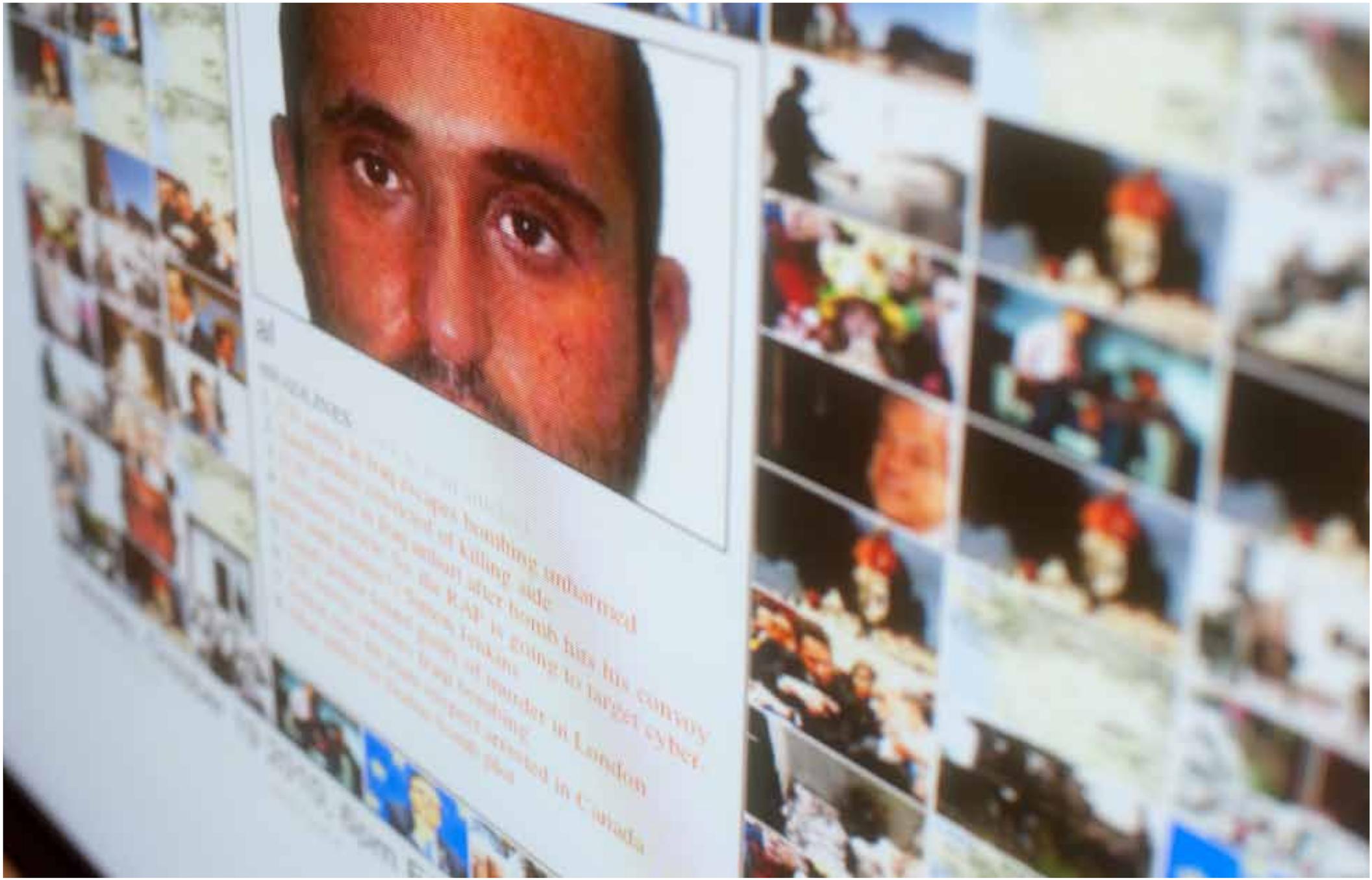
WORD COUNT

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

greg **lazy** bryandenying
8052   8053   8054
8055

CURRENT WORD

FIND WORD

BY RANK:

REQUESTED WORD: GREG
RANK: 8052

◄ PREVIOUS WORD   NEXT WORD ►

closeknit bressinghamwrac bukhara
64481   64482   64483   64484

CURRENT WORD

BY RANK

REQUESTED WORD: CLOSEKNIT
RANK: 64481
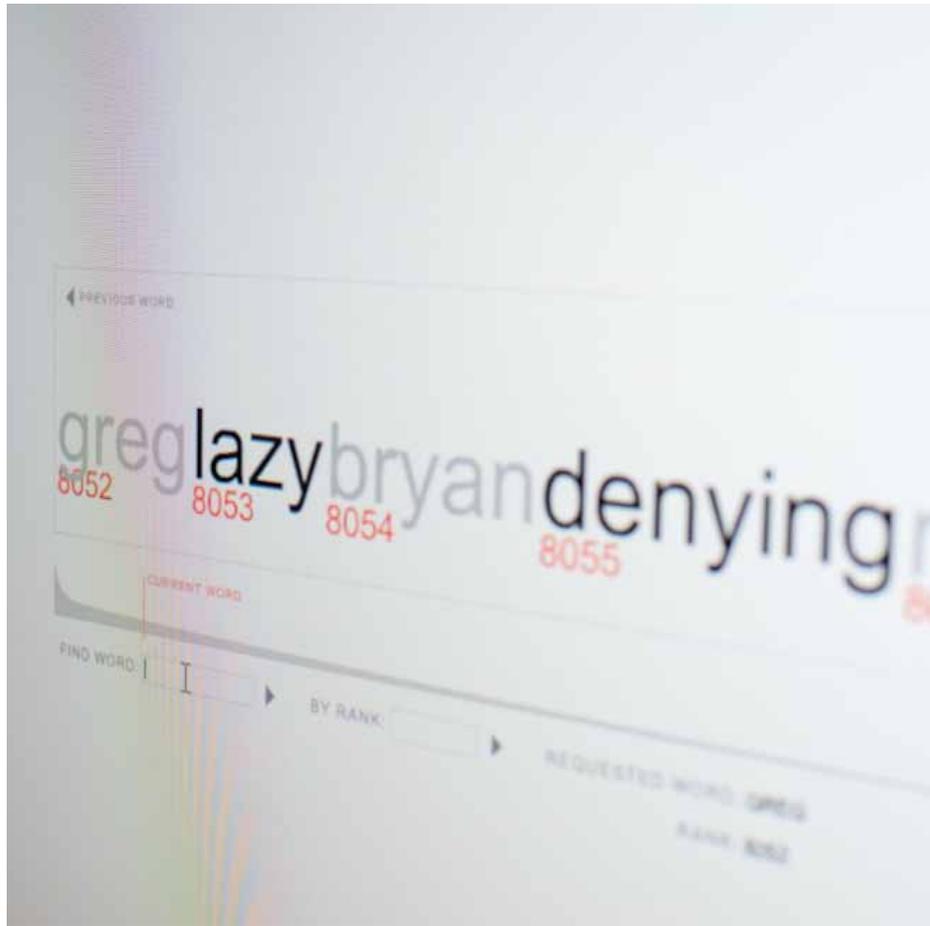
TODAY

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.

Photography, Yarn

MEN AT 30

Last week a friend of mine split up 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
Coming back to.

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

I'm 30, not 40, and my poem would go more like this:

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

At 30 you've come a long way, and you're standing on a landing surrounded by rooms with old bent doors swinging and banging 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 and 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 madly around at all of the doors, and you wonder if you should go back into one of the rooms and which one it would be, but it's so hard to decide because there are pieces of you in each of the rooms, and going into one would mean losing the parts of yourself that are in all the others and you wonder why you can't be in multiple rooms at the same time but you know it doesn't work that way.

So you have 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 know 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 reminded, because it is very sad to think about closing the doors to such beautiful rooms — rooms that never really got a chance because there was always so much climbing 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 gassing a faithful labrador you used to love but just can't care for anymore, and this passive silent softness will somehow feel more violent than gorging out organs with a spoon.

- February 9, 2010 / Santa Fe, NM

LOST ANGELES

Day three in Los(t) Angeles, still squinting at the too bright light, and still feeling, like the city itself, too scattered, too manicured, too perfect, too flawed, too impossible, too something. I see the well-primped young girls from far away, hoping to land a role. I see the well-preserved middle-aged women, hoping to land a man. I see the well-dressed suntanned men in collared shirts, sitting at streetside cafes like little Napoleons, smoking cigars and clutching their phones, 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 sunglasses, trying to look more like celebrities, and the celebrities dressed the same way, trying to look more like normal people. If only everyone could learn to look more like themselves.

Valet-parked Priuses roll past storefronts that look like movie sets, selling things you can't seem to use real money to buy, but fake paper notes printed up for some historical period piece on 2009, in which we're all cast as unknowing extras, even though we never signed a contract except secretly wanting to be A Part Of It All. This particular movie will probably go straight to video, but the viewership will be enormous.

I went for a walk this morning and saw a man in his plaid pajamas standing in his doorway and surveying his tiny perfect lawn, with its straight edges and box corners, as a sprinkler slowly spun, humming all the time like me. I felt like I had escaped to the 1950s, but I knew it was impossible to escape that far. We can run through space, but not quite get through time.

Soft smiles made of hard plastic flashed under steady sunshine, the nice hot air warmed my bare arms, and I wondered how something so apparently easy could still seem so incredibly hard.

Luckily there was Malibu (and Kyla to take me there), whose sands and sounds and waves and birds were nothing but perfect, and built back the soul the city had so rudely stolen just hours and lifetimes before.

- October 26, 2009 / Malibu, CA

SOMETHING TO HOLD

- April 19, 2010 / Harper's Ferry, WV

TOLVA

The Icelandic word for computer is Tolva.

It is derived from volve, which means prophetess, and tala, which means number.

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

Which is my kind of goddess.

– May 11, 2010 / Siglufjordur, Iceland

CLOUDS AND COINS

It was shortly after high school when I first felt replaceable.

I went to a small and fancy boarding school in Western Massachusetts, nestled between mountains and corn fields on the bank of a river that twisted through a valley filled with farms and maple sugar buckets. It was the kind of place that made you feel special.

They had a thing they called "In Loco Parentis," Latin for, "in place of parents." That's what the teachers were supposed to be for us. You had class with them, ate meals with them, played sports with them, said goodnight to them, and after four years you were pretty sure they loved you like they loved their kids – and that they'd be despondent once you left for college.

You never thought there might have been others before you, or that there might be others after you, but once you were out of there you realized there were and there will be, and then you didn't feel so special – just replaceable and lonely.

Now I feel this way every time I see kids. The younger they are, the more I feel it, and the more I ask myself what have I made of my life and what kind of man have I become, now that I've had all this time. I see kids and I think how much more time they have than I do, and I think about all they can do with that time, and how soon they'll sweep me away. Then I shake it off by sneering at how little they know, and I go away walking faster, leaning into the wind and dreaming about what I'll do next.

My math teacher in high school used to say that every great teacher should hope that her best students will one day destroy her, but I guess I never wanted to be that kind of teacher, or at least not yet.

I remember one time when I was a boy I asked my Mom what clouds were made of. She said she didn't know, exactly, and how that would be a good question for my science teacher. I remember being astonished then that anyone could grow up to be as old and wise as my Mom (who was then about as old and wise as I am now) without knowing exactly what a cloud was. Surely life would teach you this and so many other similar things!

Now that I am more or less the age my Mom was then, I understand there are many things you never end up learning, just because your own particular life doesn't end up flowing that particular way. It's not that you're stupid; it's just the way things go.

In eighth grade I had a class called General Knowledge, and it was the best class I ever had anywhere at any age. It was basically a grab bag of things that people should know, but things that people often never end up learning – like what to call a group of crows (a murder), how to remember the difference between principles and principals (principals are your pals), and what, exactly, clouds are made of (water vapor).

The class was a crash course in things that are usually picked up slowly and by accident, like lost coins, over the course of your life. This class was so memorable because it was so little like school, and so much like life. School is basically a way of keeping people occupied – a theatrical set piece designed to take up time and spit out contenting consumers.

Any adult knows that what he really knows he did not learn in school. The gradual accumulation of experience is really how we learn. But unlike school, life is unpredictable, so it would be dangerous to leave the teaching of life to life. Just think how much would get left out of the curriculum, and how hard it would be to standardize tests!

When you're walking the streets looking for coins, you never know what you're going to find, and it is the same with us. We each stumble into different situations, and this blundering serendipity is really what shapes us. Some of us stumble into understanding map projections, others into how to drive a stick-shift car, others into clouds, but you can never pick up all the coins.

An old girlfriend of mine said she knew our relationship would never last once she saw my obsession with understanding things instead of chilling out and accepting things or, as she put it – "surrendering to the emptiness of life."

I am constantly torn between the heroes of the east – who are heroes for their ability to see things as they really are – and the heroes of the west – who are heroes for their ability to see things that are not but that should be, and then to build them. One is mainly about accepting, the other is mainly about rejecting and creating. Being from the U.S., it is natural for me to have the second kind of heroes, even as I see the wisdom of the first. But whenever I try to behave like an eastern hero, it always feels like posing, wasting time, or giving up.

Maybe giving up the struggle and learning to float along is the only wise thing. But at my age I can't quite accept that, because I am too busy picking up coins and staring into clouds to see what I can make of them.

– May 16, 2010 / Keflavik, Iceland

OCEANIC ABYSS

Like Ramen.

Like baseball.

Like hairball.

Like freefall.

Like seesaw.

Like Sea World.

French Kiss.

Windy piss.

– May 13, 2010 / Grettislaug, Iceland

FIND YOUR FEET

And all at once you are thrust back into something you have done before, but which is at the same time totally new, and what you have to do quickly is 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 24, 2009 / Chadds Ford, PA

ONLY A MAN

Come into my home and I will serve you coffee cake and milk and shark meat. I will pull it from the ceiling and you will brush away the flies and I will cut it sideways with my pen knife and you will run into the grass because you cannot stand the smell of it and I will laugh and pound the table with my hand and spill the coffee. I will take my guns and shoot the mink that eat the birds and break the eggs and kill just for the hell of it. My sister will be in the kitchen and she will bring the things for us to eat and we will eat them on my bed with a table in between us and I will show you photos. I will get them from the hallway and you will see how they are only showing things I love - accordions and cameras and all my sheep especially the gray one and all my cars especially the red one. I will treat my sheep like kids because I never had a wife and never had a family and they are very beautiful especially the gray one. But I will get old and it will get hard and my back will give out and I will have to send the sheep to slaughter and it will take me years to get over the sadness. But when I am over the sadness or anyway to help me get over the sadness I will use 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 plastic and under the shark meat and I will not drive them but sometimes I will drive them and park them all around the valley in front of the mountain or in the fjord or out in the snow or the flowers and I will take pictures of the cars in these places because I love them equally the places and the cars not to mention the sheep. I will take pictures of the cars and I will put the red one next to the blue one and the blue one next to the red one and the blue one next to the blue one because I have two blue ones. I used to be a road man, then I was a mail man, then I was a mink man, then I was a sheep man, but now I am only a man and I hope you liked the coffee cake and milk and photos even though I know you didn't like the shark meat and it was too hot in the house but I will never open the windows because there was a time when we were cold.

KEEP IT TOGETHER

- August 30, 2010 / Cincinnati, OH

NOT MINE

The child's not mine, and the dog's not hers.

- November 8, 2009 / Sisters, OR
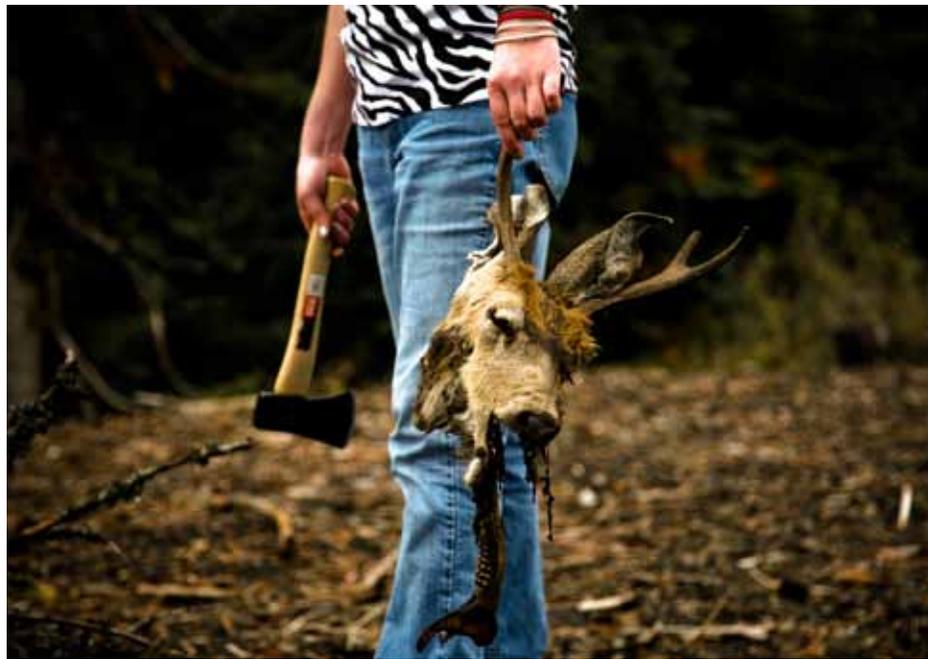
Oregon girls will tear you up and walk away like it meant nothing.

– October 15, 2009 / Sisters, OR

EYJAFJALLAJOKULL

Many times I thought it was a dream.

Earth could not possibly contain these things.

That suicide water.

That gurgling ash.

That crazy light.

That neon moss.

That moving roof.

That doomed farm.

That ridiculous arch.

That mutinous cloud.

Those powerless poles.

Those invincible gulls.

I wondered how could all that destruction possibly be so beautiful.

And then I wondered how could it possibly not.

– May 1, 2010 / Skógar, Iceland
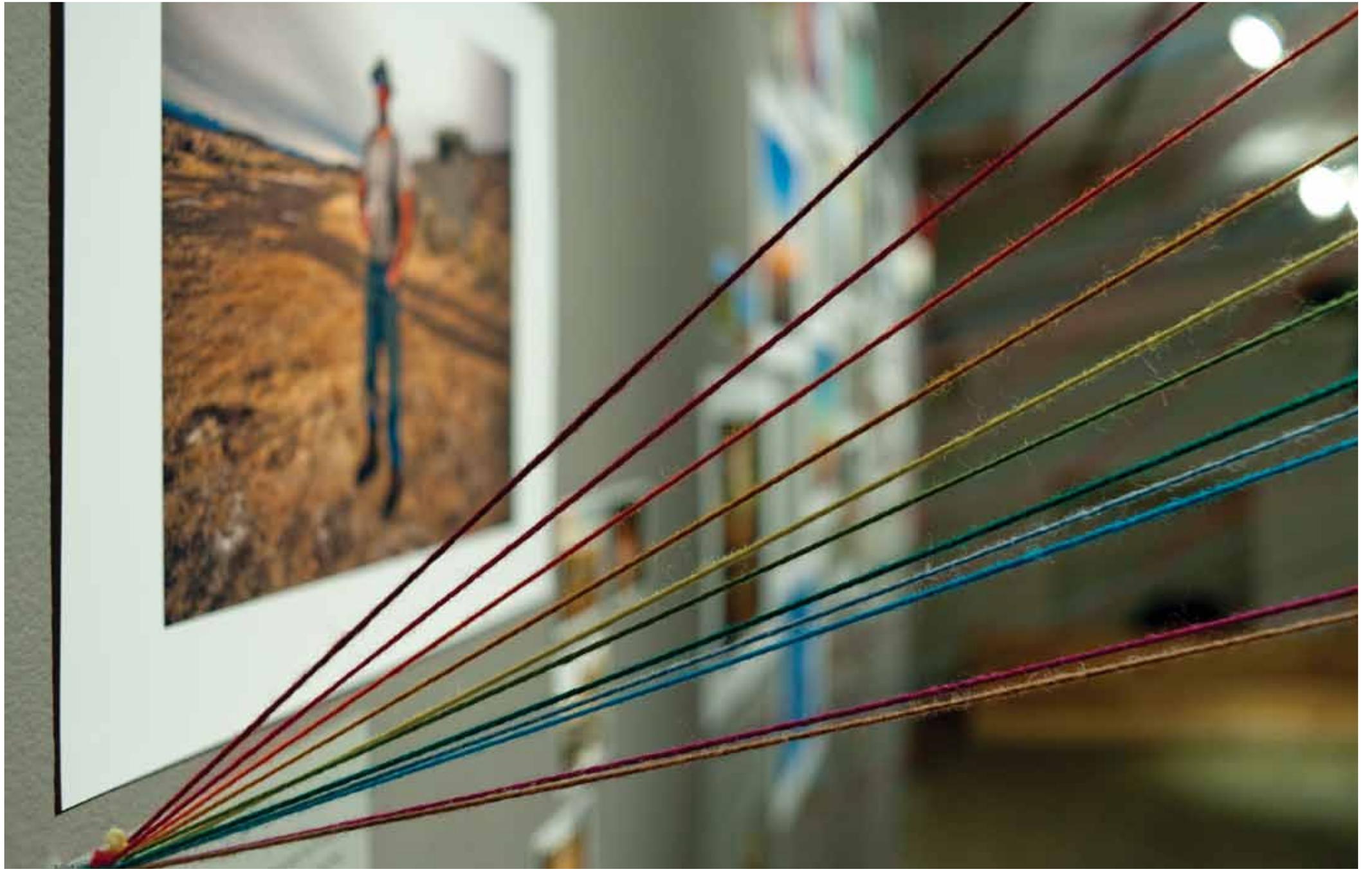
SIGNS

- Part 1: The circle -

"You gonna kill anything today?" says a voice from outside my motel room at dawn.

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

The voice belongs to one chucker hunter who is trash talking another by asking facetious hunting questions like is he going to kill anything today, when he knows very well they are both going to kill something and probably many things today because they are chucker hunters and they are here to hunt and kill chuckers.

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. Since they are secrets, you cannot read them directly - instead you must use feeling and intuition to uncover their meaning.

The man at the motel asks me where I am going and I say south. He says that first I should go north to see the playa, and I say that maybe I will. He says that really, really, I should see the playa before leaving, and he smirks at me like there is something licentious waiting for me there. I ask if I can take his picture but he says no, and then I remember you can't take pictures of prophets.

So I drive 20 miles north on a dirt road to the playa, which is vast and desiccated and totally deserted, with flat cracked earth stretching on for miles. I see a blank sign and take the road it marks, which leads to the shore of the dried up lake. I walk out onto the playa and feel the earth. In my fingers it crumbles like feta cheese. Under my feet it is soft like a yoga mat. After a while I come to a piece of wood that points to the other side and seems to say 'this is the way.'

Soon I see a small white box sitting in the dirt. As I get closer I see it is a toilet, which is a very strange thing to find in the middle of a playa. Stuffed into the toilet and staring up at me is a coyote carcass, grimacing and terrible. Nearby, a piece of wood is separated from its shadow, which seems to say that something is about to change.

I go to get my car and drive onto the playa in a trance, speeding and swerving and covering my eyes just for the hell of it. I stop precisely at the center and get out. There is a huge and perfect circle drawn in the dirt. I walk into it, and my whole body starts to tingle, like some kind of invisible energy is rushing through me. I spin around several times, and try to understand what it is.

I think how the coyote toilet was the death of something shitty in me, something I no longer need that was brought into the open and conquered in solitude. I think how the playa is like my whole life, and that this circle is the halfway point. Into the circle run tire tracks in various formations. Behind me the tracks run in perfect parallel pairs. Ahead of me the tracks cross and change places and I wonder what this means. There are no tracks inside the circle. Behind me are the mountains, covered in snow and foreboding. Ahead of me is a low mesa, lit pink by the sun. Behind me is the past, the mountains like ancestors. Ahead of me is the rest of my life, with death on the other side of the mesa. I think about driving to the mesa but I don't do that, because before you can know your future you first have to live it, and for now it is enough to understand the landscape.

So I sit in the dirt and I think for a while and I write a little bit, and when I get up I give the playa some water to help with the dryness. On my way back I see the red skull of something that died, and I think about other things that have died.

- Part 2: The Gun -

I drive south, across the beautiful desolate wasteland of southeastern Oregon, and hardly see another car. I drive dirt roads through canyons, up and down buttes, over mountains, and across wide open plains. I am hunting down Willow Creek hot springs which the motel prophet said I should visit. I get lost many times, because there are no (conventional) signs, and I venture 10 miles through sage brush up onto the wrong mountain, only to turn back once I reach the summit, which is cold and gorgeous with raptors gliding past me. I find the hot springs at last, and get out of my car.

There is one other car - a 1975 Chevy truck - with a canvas tent pitched next to it, a barbecue smoking on the ground, and hip hop music blasting. I wave politely to the man, who is big and gruff and dirty. Slowly he approaches me. He is scruffy, unshaven, holding a beer, wearing holographic skull sunglasses and a camouflage hat, and has a pistol holster strapped to his chest, with an extra clip on the side. We are alone in a vast valley with nothing around for many miles, and I am scared.

"Vermont, eh?", he says, looking at my plates.

"Yeah, sorry about that."

"You shoot guns?"

"Never shot a pistol. Shot a rifle a few times."

"You want to now?"

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

He chugs the rest of his beer, paces out ten steps, puts the can on the ground, walks back, and hands me the gun.

"Just cock it and shoot."

"Is there a big kick?"

"Not like a 357."

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

"Damn! You shure you ain't never shot a pistol before?"

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

I think he is impressed and he lets me take his picture, so I feel a bit safer taking off my clothes and bathing in the hot spring, which now feels especially baptismal. Spindly green algae dance through the water and onto my skin, and the bullet casing sits next to me on a rock, lit bright by the sun.

The man drives off for more gas, leaving me all alone. I keep on south into Nevada, passing cows, casinos, and a Christmas light cross, which collectively satisfy just about any vice.

- Part 3: The Owl -

It is late and I haven't eaten since breakfast, so I am tired and hungry and I pull into the town of Mt. Battle, 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, but each time I see the same thing, so then I know where it is I will be eating dinner and where it is I will be sleeping tonight.

I walk inside past avian artwork, and take a seat in the big and dimly lit dining room, at a square table next to the wall. The man at the neighboring table is a former Gulf war air force pilot, who returned to Reno to find his wife with another man, so he moved here and bought an RV park with crystal meth tenants. He talks constantly to me without interruption for more than an hour. I only grunt and nod as he goes from pork chops, to missile warfare, to electronic espionage, to Middle Eastern politics, to gold mining, to central American shopping malls, to geothermal explosions, to volcano airplane photography, to the myth of climate change, to earth's rotational precession, to food shortages, to marital infidelity, to litigious neighbors, to hearing loss and diabetes, and on and on, every few sentences shifting his position or standing up briefly to stop a cramp, but never ceasing to talk.

I have the feeling that some lesson is hiding in all of this talk, but I am too tired to fish it out. It is one of those conversations that begins very interesting, but quickly becomes exhausting, and instead of really listening to the words, you listen only for a break in cadence when it would be polite to excuse yourself and leave. Finally I say it has been lovely talking but I have to go, and I thank him for telling me so much. I think that maybe something he said buried itself in my subconscious and will reemerge to me at some crucial moment between here and the mesa, but who knows when or what that moment might be.

He follows me through the casino, pointing out gamblers who owe him rent. They are hiding in the light of the slot machines and smoking, hoping to win big so they can avoid eviction, which strikes me as a tenuous strategy. We go outside into the night, our faces glowing red from the neon light of the Owl Club sign overhead. I zip up my coat and wish him well. We shake hands and roll away into the cold Nevada night.

- January 16, 2010 / Willow Creek, OR

JONATHAN HARRIS
IN DISCUSSION
WITH ANDY CAMERON

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 x 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'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?

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.

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.

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.

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 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!

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.

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.