

Data, data, everywhere, nor any bit to use: copyleft havens in the information sea.

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As graphic designers often remind us, information is beautiful.¹ Combined with the plethora of programmable design tools available today and the ever-growing quantity of data available online, processing anything into gorgeous graphics and animations is increasingly easy.

Looking at the ancestors of these modes of representation, we might have difficulty imagining that one day pie charts and monochrome histograms would escape the realm of office meetings, scientific papers and management tools, to reach out to a broader and sexier audience gathered in the many communities of data visualization fans. Of course, plots and graphs software in office tools are still as dull as they were the first day of their creation, but they make it to the covers of many glossy magazines, just like fashion models and celebrities.

This success did not happen overnight; it is the result of the increasing electronic mediation that exists when we produce and consume information. In essence, data visualization is so versatile and flexible that it becomes almost meaningless; it is used in media to engage an audience in just about any topic. Indeed, pretty much anything can be represented by anything, and it does not always matter if it makes sense or not as long as it looks good – extra points granted if it's animated, even more if you can interact with it. Because any set of data can be mapped and represented into any other complex visual representation, the question of sense, interpretation, and usefulness is bypassed by the powerful illustrative value of the visualization.

As a consequence, if there is any truth to be sought through such illustrations, it is more likely to be lying somewhere within the design process that led to the creative mapping of data using algorithms in an artistic way – rather than in its ability to successfully translate a model from one mode of representation to another, so as to highlight an interesting feature or quality.

¹David McCandless, *Information is Beautiful: The Information Atlas* (New York: Collins, 2010).

The whole field of data visualization is symptomatic of the way we communicate, share and publish information today. We have at our fingertips a vast amount of data that we can access using a combination of hardware and software technology.

Usman Haque's data brokerage platform, Pachube, is a good example to show the connected fetishisms of information exchange and processing. Entering the main website, we are greeted with the following text: "Store, share & discover real-time sensor, energy and environment data from objects, devices & buildings around the world. Pachube is a convenient, secure & scalable platform that helps you connect to and build the 'internet of things.'"²

This way of engaging with data and the network is not specific to Pachube but is itself a good, non-infographic illustration of the way information is treated nowadays. By focusing too much on the networked infrastructure that permits the distribution and the processing of data, the nature of information that is being distributed and processed is constantly fading into the background. Its "raison d'être" becomes of lesser interest. In this quest for system interfaces and protocols, quantity and quality are now both superseded by potentiality and accessibility.

Instead of asking substantive questions (e.g., Why are such data available? What are their nature and meaning? What are the conditions of using and connecting to such a system?), artists and designers can become overwhelmed by the potentiality of data and the simplified access to it. They can be distracted from challenging the concepts and concurrent definitions of freedom and openness of information on the Internet. It is not surprising, then, that media art practices often lead to the creation of complex pipes in which data flows from one input to a processing unit, the output of which can then be plugged and processed further for no apparent reason – other than the obvious excitement to shape and develop the aesthetics of an infinite LEGO construction site.

While the playfulness of the LEGO methodology for making art is not so far from the metamechanics of Jean Tinguely, and the nature of the pipes we use to build the "Internet of things" is not so distant from the one that René Magritte painted in *La trahison des images*, a society obsessed with communication and the transmission of information does seem to lose something in translation.

Indeed, unlike the metamechanics that were created as a critique to the cult of technological progress, and the pipe that questioned the real and its representation, we are, in fact, more than ever embracing the consumerism of goods that can pull, transform and push information to build an ever-expanding universe of misrepresentation and deceptive realities.

²"Pachube – data infrastructure for the Internet of Things," Connected Environments Ltd, <http://www.pachube.com> (accessed April 19, 2011).



Figure 1: Heureka (detail), 1964, Jean Tinguely, steel, Photo Micha L. Rieser – Creative Commons Attribution -ShareAlike 3.0 Unported (CC BY-SA 3.0)

This is problematic and is best exemplified in the visual field, more particularly throughout the coverage of news and the self-documentation of history on a daily basis. As noted by Inke Arns, our experience of the world is heavily relying on media, thus less and less based on direct observation. While this is not something new, according to Arns, the difference today resides in “the total and permanent availability of images, where any image at any given time can become its own simulacrum.”³

More specifically, on the Internet, data travels inside a “rhizomatic” labyrinth of many different network topologies, a labyrinth which existence solely relies on its never-ending expansion in the domain of technologies and their legal framework. This rapid growth goes hand in hand with the development of statistics, machine-to-machine communication, analytics and data mining. Because it’s tuned to give access, process and interface with the many systems through which information is flowing, it’s a positive feedback.

So the information does flow, again and again, aimlessly and without interruption; information is mashed up in an ever-changing superimposition and collage of the truth. Looking back at the dramatic events that happened in Japan after the

³Inke Arns, “Introduction to History Will Repeat Itself,” in *History Will Repeat Itself*, eds. Inke Arns, Gabriele Horn and Kunst-Werke Berlin (Berlin: Revolver Publishing by VVV, 2007).

2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, Brian Massumi writes:

Of course, nothing can ever expunge the horror. It will be archived. The images of the disaster will be held indefinitely in store. For as long as there is an Internet, they will remain available for recirculation. It is not so much that the horror is replaced by human warmth and its accompaniments. It is rather that it “decays” in the media. The horror transmutes into a different affective element, its intensity halved, then halved again, eventually reducing to trace levels. Globally, the event settles back into a more stable range of the periodic table of collective emotion.⁴

So when contemplating the information sea, we can almost feel peaks and tension, waves, echoes, ripples and patterns, and be seduced by its cold beauty that does not take a stand, as it is too busy with its inner mechanisms of delivery and distribution. But the sense of decay is an illusion coming from an attempt to attach a human interpretation to such patterns disguised as communication. From a system perspective, the origin and historical context of information is irrelevant. For example, in image boards, we are constantly reminded of this disconnection: photos of Nazis are mashed up with MC Hammer lyrics, and kittens are pasted onto pornographic photos.⁵

It would be naive to think that art can escape this fate, but even if it is being treated just like any other form of information, once mediated via electronic systems and turned data, could there be a way to manipulate this mediation in such a way that it alters our perception of this never ending “dada-esque” information orgy that is Internet culture?

Unlike instant forwarding, remixing and mashing up that are short-lived manipulations of the information, reenactment is a way to achieve a short circuit effect by creating distance with an event,⁶ thus disrupting space and time to allow reflection and analysis. Eventually, the reenactment will also decay because it is operating only on the perception of information and not its condition of existence in the digital mediated space.

To provide a more stable and durable effect it would then be necessary to operate in the space in between information and its distribution, building a haven

⁴Brian Massumi, “The half-life of disaster,” *The Guardian*, April 15, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/apr/15/half-life-of-disaster> (accessed April 19, 2011).

⁵Timo Klok, “4chan and Imageboards,” in *post.pic: imageboards, tagging, tool images, visual studies – a primer by practitioners, Communication in a Digital Age*, (Rotterdam: Willem de Kooning Academy, Rotterdam University, 2010), 16-19.

⁶Inke Arns, “Introduction to History Will Repeat Itself.”

within the legal and technological fabric of the Net.



Figure 2: Close-up Data Center. Photo The Planet – Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Antoine Moreau, co-creator of the Free Art License,⁷ points that “L’art est à la culture ce que l’inter-dit est aux dits.”⁸ By arguing that art is to culture what the inter-said is to what is said, he is referring to a concept from Lacan⁹ that addresses the discontinuity of the signifier. Jacques Lacan coined the term “discontinuity” to describe the existence of in-between spaces and holes in the structure of language that give clues to hidden truths that analysis seeks to access and reveal.

According to Moreau, art is working in a similar fashion with culture. Furthermore he urges that there is a need to separate the communication—the cultural fact of what is said—from the creation; the artistic fact from the inter-said.

La distinction est indispensable pour comprendre le rapport conflictuel qui existe entre l’art et la culture et en apprécier le nécessaire jeu martial. Cela permet de mieux saisir que l’exploration des limites propre à l’art met en branle, au risque de l’écroulement, l’édifice culturel. Aussi,

⁷“Free Art License 1.3,” <http://artlibre.org/licence/lal/en> (accessed April 19, 2011).

⁸Antoine Moreau, “L’art est à la culture ce que l’inter-dit est aux dits,” *Loisirs Éducation*, September-October, 2002.

⁹Jacques Lacan, “Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir,” in *Écrits*, (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1966), 800.

il me semble que les pratiques artistiques qui doivent s'inscrire dans le cadre borné de la culture ne peuvent faire l'objet d'une politique culturelle. Qu'il faut accepter et apprécier la faille que l'artiste en herbe va créer dans le champ culturel. Car si le grain ne meurt, c'est toute une récolte qui devient stérile. Le jeune artiste est un cultivateur qui nie la culture productiviste et positive. Loin d'être nihiliste, il est le révélateur critique et constructif de ce qui fait la culture vivante.¹⁰

Applying the principle of the inter-said to what Antoine Moreau reveals to us, we can see the hidden truth within the space left in between his own words, and that led him and the co-authors of the Free Art License to see in the GNU General Public License¹¹ a clever mechanism; bending the limitations of copyright to highlight and enforce the space in-between, and making room and creating pockets of artistic freedom in the interstice of the intellectual property fabric.

As a consequence, what is too quickly, too often understood as a mere accelerator for collaboration, sharing and processing of information, a free culture license such as the free art license is, in fact, also working as a means to critically engage with the mediation of information. It does this by developing an alternative system by reclaiming this in-between space. Unlike Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ), which also operates as a zone inter-dite in the network, the free art license aims at setting up a foundation.

Babylon takes its abstractions for realities; precisely within this margin of error the TAZ can come into existence. Getting the TAZ started may involve tactics of violence and defense, but its greatest strength lies in its invisibility—the State cannot recognize it because History has no definition of it. As soon as the TAZ is named (represented, mediated), it must vanish, it will vanish, leaving behind it an empty husk, only to spring up again somewhere else, once again invisible because undefinable in terms of the Spectacle.¹²

Licensing does not wait for emerging network properties and does not strive for the ephemeral intervention; instead, it seeks to build and develop a stable alternative information network using the in-between territory.

Of course the risk of doing so is that, while naming the unspeakable inter-said by the means of creating rules and using them with a Free Art License, the art

¹⁰ Antoine Moreau, "L'art est à la culture ce que l'inter-dit est aux dits," *Loisirs Éducation*.

¹¹ "GNU General Public License," Free Software Foundation, <http://www.gnu.org/licenses/gpl.txt>. (accessed April 19, 2011).

¹² Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (New York: Autonomedia, 2003), 99.

distributed as such becomes forever sealed within a nested free culture and might fail to reach or engage the one it criticizes.

Arguably, in the end, what remains visible and the most effective is happening at the gates of mediation, where copyright and copyleft collide. The license seen as an artistic intervention becomes more valuable than the works it generates.

Perhaps the Free Art License and similar free culture licenses are not the final answer to the increasing passive consumption of data that prevent us from understanding the dangers and illusions linked to the networked manipulation of information. What they do offer, though, is a way of thinking, a proof that nothing is set in stone. They do show that hacking the system and mediating the information is possible. When operating at the gates of information, art can effectively operate as a disruption that critically engages with the production of culture, not just transforming it for the sake of rehashing the same data over and over again.