

The Perpetual Art Frame:

Jonathan Harris & Sep Kamvar's net-based art project *WeFeelFine*

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Dots in all colours and sizes race around the black background. Chaotic to the viewer – it is difficult to fathom what exactly is being shown. The dots demand attention, clustering around the cursor; one springs open and a sentence, drawn from one of thousands of blogs, appears.

This is not a advertisement campaign designed to sell – neither is it a well hidden computer virus threatening to attack. Instead its a net-based art project. It is *WeFeelFine*.

This article discusses the term avant-garde in relation to Internet Art and more specific the art project *WeFeelFine* by Jonathan Harris & Sep Kamvar (2006).

I wish to draw parallels between the historical avant-garde movements of the early 20th century, in their fascination with the new possibilities and options within new technology and new media, and the interactive net-based art project *WeFeelFine*. This article will show how both traditional avant-garde art practise and the contemporary art project of *WeFeelFine* are rooted in an engagement exploring and reflecting upon the function of the media in the interplay between art, technology and everyday life, by focusing on the technological development which in some ways has made it possible to achieve that integration of art and life demanded by early avant-garde avantgarde movements.

Art outside itself

According to Peter Bürger, who was the first academic to dwell upon the concept of avant-garde art, the main role of the avant-garde movements in the beginning of the 20th century was to re-define the entire art production in order to negate the existing norms within the art institution. The artist of the avant-garde is concerned with an art production that has an explicit political goal: a response to the current bourgeois society, to change the power structures within the art institution and production, and to integrate art within the everyday life of 'ordinary people'. Thus, the production of art as an individual act – as a unique piece of art made by a unique artist – was negatedⁱ.

The historical avant-garde is thus, in Bürger's optic, interpreted as a political as well as an artistic vanguard which used new and experimental methods to reach their political goals. In order for art

production to fall within the avant-garde tradition, the art needs somehow to include a (political) agenda which reaches outside the artwork itself.

Harris & Kamvar's conceptual web based art project *WeFeelFine* can be seen as a digital collage. It continually monitors thousands of blogs for sentences that contain the phrases "I feel" or "I am feeling". These sentences form the kernel of the project, with graphical representations of the world's current mood built from this disparate and otherwise unconnected information. The project collects 15,000 "feelings" every day; to date 13 million "feelings" have been collected and form an intimate portrait of our collective emotional landscape. Demographic information about the blogger (age, gender, location, and weather(!)) is collected along with the sentence, as well as any photos that might be attached to that particular entry.

The project uses a Java applet to display this information within a normal internet browser window, which means the project is easily accessible to most internet users.

Each feeling is represented by a dot within a two-dimensional virtual landscape. Bright dots are happy, dark dots are sad, and the diameter of each dot indicates the length of the sentence inside. The dots move energetically around the canvas, but tend to cluster around the pointer. When one dot is selected, the full sentence is displayed, along with the information of the blogger, allowing the participant to delve into an individual feeling within the chaos.

Based on data from the blogs and the bloggers, it thus becomes possible to create cross-sectional views that answer questions like 'Are the people of Copenhagen happier than elsewhere?' 'Are men sadder than women?' 'Does the weather influence mood?'

The *WeFeelFine* project is, of course, not a scientific analysis of the world's current mood. Rather it works as a sort of social experience or a global archive or database of human feeling. On their web page Harris & Keplar describe their motivation thus:

“At its core, *WeFeelFine* is authored by everyone. It will grow and change, reflecting what's on our blogs, what's in our minds. We hope it makes the world seem a little smaller, and we hope it helps people see the beauty in everyday ups and downs of life.”ⁱⁱ

At such, the artist have a very outspoken agenda regarding their art production. Almost like the manifestos of the early avant-garde movements.

Artist(s) as post-producers – Current ways of doing avant-garde?

Accessible only through the net, and with the net as both its gallery and its inspiration, *WeFeelFine* has an inseparable attachment to its audience/co-producers.

Harris & Kepvar play the role of both artists and curators. They function as information architects, building a framework to collate and displays content created by unknown others. The *WeFeelFine* project is only made possible by the (involuntary) contributions of thousands of bloggers, whose work and - by the nature of personal blogs – feelings, become the central component of the project. This intimately links the piece with the trials and tribulations of everyday life; by further breaking the barriers between what we know as art and what we know as life.

In *WeFeelFine* the point at which the artist's work is finished marks only the birth of the art piece. This redefines the role of artist, who now functions as a builder of a frame upon which the work itself emerges and also, potentially, a redefinition of the audience as producer.

Nicolas Bourriaud, a contemporary art theorist, explains how contemporary art practice tends to be a procedural, co-operative production, which functions as the making or after-making, rather than the product itself. He notes: "the artwork is no longer an endpoint but a simple moment in an infinite chain of contributions".ⁱⁱⁱ

In the case of *WeFeelFine* the artist thereby surrenders the control or the sovereignty of the art piece, which in theory could go on forever. Still, Harris & Kepvar can unplug the project and thereby putting it to an end (although if the work was sold in the traditional sense, the the new owners would control the power switch).

Nicolas Bourriaud names the current art practice *Postproduction*. Postproduction covers a method, that again covers different media or genres, whereby the creation of artwork is based on a re-use of already known objects or materials^{iv}. Bourriaud insists that there is a large difference between the historical avant-garde's new and ground breaking inventions, and the currently prevalent use of pre-existing materials in the current postproduction. The avant-garde aimed to create something *new*; where the contemporary artist is more concerned with how to use already known material and thereby changing or displace it – even by just a little:

“The artistic question is no longer: 'what can we make that are new?' but 'how can we do with what we have?' In other words, how can we produce singularity and meaning from this chaotic mass of objects, names, and references that constitutes our daily life? Artists today program forms more than they compose them (...) they remix available forms and make use of data.”^v

The role of the artist thus becomes to navigate the swarm of material or data and create paths through and logic in what seems to be a fragmented and chaotic everyday reality. The creation becomes the selecting and placing of already existing forms rather than producing new ones.^{vi}

WeFeelFine as Avant-garde

The *WeFeelFine* project can be seen as avant-garde on several levels.

On a purely structural level it mimics the surrealist and dadaist tradition of collage and montage by bringing images together in order to create new meanings. The re-use of digital content is close to the method of object trouvé or ready-made. Although there is an important difference; the digital content also tends to retain its original context as well as the altered context created within the production.

As seen in historical avant-garde, *WeFeelFine* also celebrates and explores new media and technology.

WeFeelFine intends to make a globalised world seem a little smaller. The political project of the historical avant-garde movements was tied to a social dimension; like the demand for art to be an integral part of everyday life instead of an elitist experience formed by and produced for a bourgeois audience. As opposed to the traditional avant-garde's concern with the ruling bourgeois power controlling the art discourse, *WeFeelFine* is charged with a social dimension rather than an explicit political dimension.

Cyber-voyerism?

Combining art with real life, or in the case of *WeFeelFine*, with fragments of reality, may be the real core of the project; it presents a place of a mixed reality.

The main components in *WeFeelFine*, the million of different blogs, are already-published material that has a life and function outside the space of the art piece. It thereby raises questions about who is creating and who is exploring this reality. Further, the project potentially raises ethical questions by re-publishing thoughts that were not explicitly created to be published in this context. The borders between private and public are often very transparent on the internet – which *WeFeelFine* shows us.

The compilation of data (the blogs) make a connection between millions of people around the world

by illustrating similarities, differences and causes of 'emotions'.

As an art media and as an art institution, the internet is different from traditional media in that it is a multi-parallel communicative medium; it communicates knowledge and experience simultaneously across millions of channels.

The internet makes a break with the art institution possible – and in this case can be seen as a natural extension of the demands for refutation of the art institution that Bürger linked to the avant-garde movements.^{vii}

Avant-garde as being constructive

WeFeelFine is not an art project that demands revolution; nor does it wish to overthrow or subvert society.

The historical avant-garde is defined by the negation of then-contemporary art practice. In this sense it can be understood as negative or destructive.

In *WeFeelFine* the artists function as architects. The art piece harnesses existing content to build something larger and more meaningful than the parts. The main differences between historical avant-garde and *WeFeelFine* thus becomes the different approaches towards being either constructive or destructive. Where avant-garde art, not only according to Bürger but also contemporary theorists like Danish Mikkel Bolt, is art that, in its core, demands a radical break or revolution to make space for a new and better alternative; *WeFeelFine* is different. Its take-off is new media and it uses all available technology, but is not interested in dividing – instead it wishes to connect. It approaches new ways of creating new meanings across information on the internet, but it has no radical demands to break down the system in search of a better alternative. The alternative is to be found *within* the existing system.

Avant-garde art has always used newly accessible materials. When *WeFeelFine* uses the internet as both platform and media it can be seen as a natural consequence of the digital era. But on the other hand, it *is* new; net-art *is* an articulation of the current bounds of possibility within technological development.

Free or destructive software. Or how to be radical within an art discourse

If art, in order to be “proper avant-garde”, needs to be political and revolutionary and break with the existing norms and laws within society, as earlier suggested, the internet might still be the place to

look for more suitable contenders; embodied in free software or software hacking as an art practise. Software art, by the nature of its content, if made properly, is impossible to distinguish from “real” software. Software art is conceptual and often non-visual and placed somewhere between art and activism. One among many is the *bienale.py* (2001) by Eva and Franco Mattes which is a software virus published as an art project from the Slovenian pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2001^{viii}. Both Lev Manovich and Pia Warnfeldt notes how software-development as an art practise may be interpreted as the contemporary equivalence of avant-garde art; it works destructively towards an outspoken agenda either by subversion in its freeness (both financially and intellectually), or by more explicitly destructive means, as the above example, through the spreading of vira.^{ix}

Bibliography and further readings

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List of works

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bienale.py (2001)

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- i Bürger: 1984.
 - ii Wefeelfine.org/mission.html (300110)
 - iii Bourriaud: 2002, p. 20.
 - iv Ibid.
 - v Bourriaud: 2002 p. 17.
 - vi Ibid.
 - vii Bürger: 1984.
 - viii www.0100101110101101.org (300110)
 - ix Wirnfeldt: 2004.
Manovic: 2008. (300110)