FURTHERFIELD

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How to Grow Love on the Internet?

By Bidhan Jacobs - 19/11/2015

tags

#NetArt abstract, web art, avant prose, condensation, iconoclast algorithm art theory art, code media theory photography

"I-love-you: the figure refers not to the declaration of love,

to the avowal,

but to the repeated utterance of the love cry."

Roland Barthes, *The Lover's Discourse. Fragments*, 1977.

Designed and published online on October 14th 2004[1], restored for *The Wrong (Again)* on November 1st 2015, the website *I Love You* by French artist Jacques Perconte[2] is not only a wonderful achievement of his research on image files visualization through the Internet, but also a fundamental piece of artwork for three reasons: first, it crystallizes a history of audiovisual technologies in the web age; next, it allows the analysis of his singular inventions on plasticity which are shaped by the offensive processes and techniques Perconte has developed until 2015; finally, it makes explicit the artist's constant will to put the body to the test of digital technologies (in this case the partner's body) and to literally inject life (each and every thought, interest, feeling, emotion, excitement, and desire aroused in him by the beloved body).

Two events in 2003 gave birth to this piece: a publication proposal from French publisher Didier Vergnaud of a book with the digital photographs of bodies he had been taking tirelessly; and his romantic encounter with the woman who would become his partner, muse and model, Isabelle Silvagnoli. *I Love You* merges two stories, two passions. The one with Isabelle blooms in May 2003[3]; at this time, Perconte has already an extensive experience of digital technologies that he had developed since 1995[4].

At the Bordeaux University, when Perconte notices that a computer is connected to the rest of world, he becomes aware of the technical and aesthetic issues of the digital network, issues largely ignored at this time. His quick mastering of how the web operates leads to a decisive work on "the digital bodies": three image generator websites (*ncorps*) and four films made by re-filming multiple loops of these animated pictures. This series denotes that Perconte has assimilated four essential dimensions of the digital.

First, he notes the image exists primarily in the state of a compressed digital signal that needs to be displayed; the signal recorded and stored as a file is a *model*, shaped by algorithms; its visualizations change only according to the codecs and the supports. Next, he distinguishes the human dimension of the web: the bodies of the users surfing the Internet on their computers and interlinking one another.

Then, the material dimension: the computers interconnected by an abundance of servers all around the world which produces a random digital time; indeed Perconte noticed the connection time to the hosting server of his websites was unpredictable since the answering time fluctuated according to the Internet traffic density, the connection's and the browser's qualities, and the computer's performance executing

the query.

So he notices the fantastic system failures: "when the first JPEGs popped up on websites, it wasn't unusual for a picture to be only partially displayed. Sometimes, this happened to produce strange distortions in the image. (…) Every now and then, the image would totally turn into an abstract composition with amazing colors."[5] Consequently, these fluctuations of display reveal a prodigiously fertile field of investigation: recoding the visualization. Finally, the web can be defined by the coexistence of places, bodies, machines, protocols and programs interacting in complex ways as an evolving ecosystem. Thus, a device aimed at transforming models could be designed (model meaning both the person the artist reproduces with forms and images and the coded reduction), as GIF or JPEG sequences animated on a website. Since the parameters involved in the visualization of these sequences are renewed at each connection, Perconte knows these metamorphosis will be unlimited and give birth to *n* bodies [*corps*]). This research allowed Perconte to establish, by 1996, a stable platform aimed at recoding the visualization within the web to ultimately break the limitations of the model's code into which the digital signal is reduced.

who can know how much love there is in this picture ?
Something like zero octet (0 time i love you)

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/9j/4AAQSkZJRgABAgAAZABkAAD/7AARRHVja3kAAQAEAAAAkwAA/+4AIUFkb2J1AGTAAAAAAQMKAEAMDBgkAABoMAAAjV
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U1NTUBDAoKDAOMDgwMDhIODg4SFA4PDw4UGhEREwERGIEXFBQUFBchHRBaGhofUSQkISEkJCCOtKy0tNTU1NTU1NTU1NTU1Nf/
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As he undertakes assembling photographs of Isabelle for the book project (*38 degrés*), this experience of the web will come back to him. The collection of several thousands digital pictures springs from the extensive exploration of the beloved body's patterns and the obtained signals he looped (he retakes the displayed pictures several times), in an attempt to test the representation of love. The problem is twofold. On the one hand, this collection can only be unlimited since the observation is inexhaustible as he puts it: "when I think about her body, I dream of landscapes so large that one gets lost completely, there is so much to recognize, kilometers of skin where warmth rules, a soft, almost empty desert. Beauty, immensity where every vibration of light pushes the colors to reveal themselves in new ways. The variations (...) are endless."[6] Furthermore, despite experimental photography techniques, he quickly reaches the limits of how much an image is capable of expressing absolute love. In order to find and visualize this love present within these files, Perconte selects and ranks hundreds of these images in a database and places them in an ecosystem on the web.

Perconte developed a server-side program by writing an open source application in PHP, the *love writing program[7]*, in order to quantify the love present in the source code of these digital images displayed on the web. Love being unquantifiable by definition, the artist must add an arbitrary but rigorous calculation. This quantification is performed by the application triggered when a user clicks on one of the images of the collection: it calculates a specific variable by taking into account all the physical parameters of the connection but also the mathematical constants of proportions and universal harmony – ∏ and F (the golden section); then the application opens the image file, transforms it as a hexadecimal code and substitutes every occurrence of the sought value by the phrase "I Love You," thus changing the architecture of the code describing the image. The browser requested to visualize the image compiles the modified code, but can only display it partially, at the cost of radical visual transformations, such as reconfigurations pixel structures, the emergence of new colors resulting in the reinterpretation of original motifs or subjects; the greater the amount of pure love, the more intense the abstraction. The motifs of the beloved body can mingle or merge entirely with the figuration of love. The browser is sometimes unable to visualize the image resulting in the appearance of a broken icon with a quote from Roland Barthes: "To try to write love is to confront the *muck* of language: that region of

hysteria where language is both too much and too little, excessive (…) and impoverished (…)."[8]The broken icon evokes a digital iconoclasm, but furthermore signifies the limitations of visualization protocols that have been overtaken by an overflow inexpressible love. This substitution in the image source code of a value by the literal writing of love, raises the Perconte's program to a "*loveware.*"[9]

I love you : code109+23-108*10@2008 Jan 10 07-35-27 - 5.jpg | Thursday 10th of January 2008 07:35:27 AM | 3 I love you where found in the image code

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b/AFJ4l+G3Knrm4M3z+W2vfe/L/U39U8L9Y+b18HOhF83tPHbw/wrK7u3/t/6NUHFvL+f0vp0/2jh215SHfsU6zp2/hHf239u7Zb8aT+8hK4yN/
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kn4/WjA898Nce#Mll#sPvPCsZW7cH5Tc=/3uxHi44X8JTXCucrl/y3NT5ZPp22N/6++Aav3=rxR/sy4EaWt/Gf+rvd57dV/7D0yvN3/NNvev7=6k/L/Pd/
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wsav3pP6K/hd+fD0ePv/DvkZWBTurae2fya#4Z9/4zUGAk2/Kq3+x32eM/TvyeDOGc50V0xd6uG4GTeaR1P/TP2P84ePizjB1j72Fiy+1n5WUHS2k6P7
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Ytcr/ACTZ1ZST+aP05cHHuPak/wCfk1/1typMbjqbI/wA598/X1ya0bg4Cn FBAD/Uee/8XQfz+9%Ni/98/37mx8a1qOn/31+i9kPX88ZQ5b7+VJ/9kw

Not only has Perconte given life to this website, but he has been maintaining it for the eleven years he has been sharing his life with his partner. First and foremost, he constantly upgrades it. Indeed, he programmed on February 14th 2005 an "I Love You Collection" of all the "I Love You's" which will be written in the images' source code; from this description, the "Love Counter" determines the number of "I Love You's" and their transposition in bytes: "This is a concrete and scientific way to know as precisely as possible how much love is streamed online, and more importantly how much love is contained in this work. Every time a picture is displayed and the code modified by love messages, the counter is updated. The more time goes by, the more love grows."[10] Thus, the users themselves, without suspecting it, testify to the history of this Perconte's love for his partner, write this love, perpetuate and amplify it. Donating his images to the network, leaving it to others to speak for him, the artist is no longer the excessive delirious lover (wonderfully described by Barthes[11]), but one who loves. Then, the artist updates his website on a regular basis.

For each exhibition he replaces the image collection and operates small technical changes in order to avoid falling behind on the developments of the web. Furthermore, he designed a photographic exhibition of this work started in 2003, *It's All About Love*, from January 17th to April 17th 2008 in Pessac, where he gives to the public a synthesis and extension of the project, in the form of prints and animations on iPods[12]. Finally, he undertakes a complete restoration of the website in 2015. Indeed, *I Love You* has suffered from a rapid disruption of the web and the visualized pictures often began to show large gray patches. The invitation from The Wrong gave him the opportunity to get back to this core piece. The solution – consisting in placing the website in its original technological context, that is to say, on a server with the same configurations as in 2004 – was met with refusal from the web hosting providers. This is how he decided to work with one of his students of Chalon-sur-Saône, Garam Choi, a true code virtuoso, in order to rethink the programming of the website according to a large principle which governs web in recent years.

From the beginning of the web until the posting of *I Love You*, applications were executed by servers. However, with the exponential increase in web traffic, servers quickly became overloaded; moreover, computers have seen their computing power and storage soar while other programming languages, like JavaScript, gained importance. Thus, the logic that governed web-programming moved applications to the client-side. Choi and Perconte have therefore developed identically, from the original program in PHP, an application written in JavaScript so that it could be interpreted on the client-side, while maintaining the database on a server. The issue at stake was to create a dialogue between the server and the client-side application, especially to quantify the number of "I Love You's" and write it into the database. Indeed, server specifications entail technological obstacles as soon as the instructions are not in compliance with the protocol. But the artist was quickly able to find a way to instruct the program to circumvent the prohibitions. Indeed, not only does he operates the substitution technique to modify the images source codes, but uses it as a trick to fool the server. The idea is to do it as if the client were loading an image from the server to display it; but the called address executes instead a script, in other words, instead of the image URL, the number of "I Love You's" is shown.
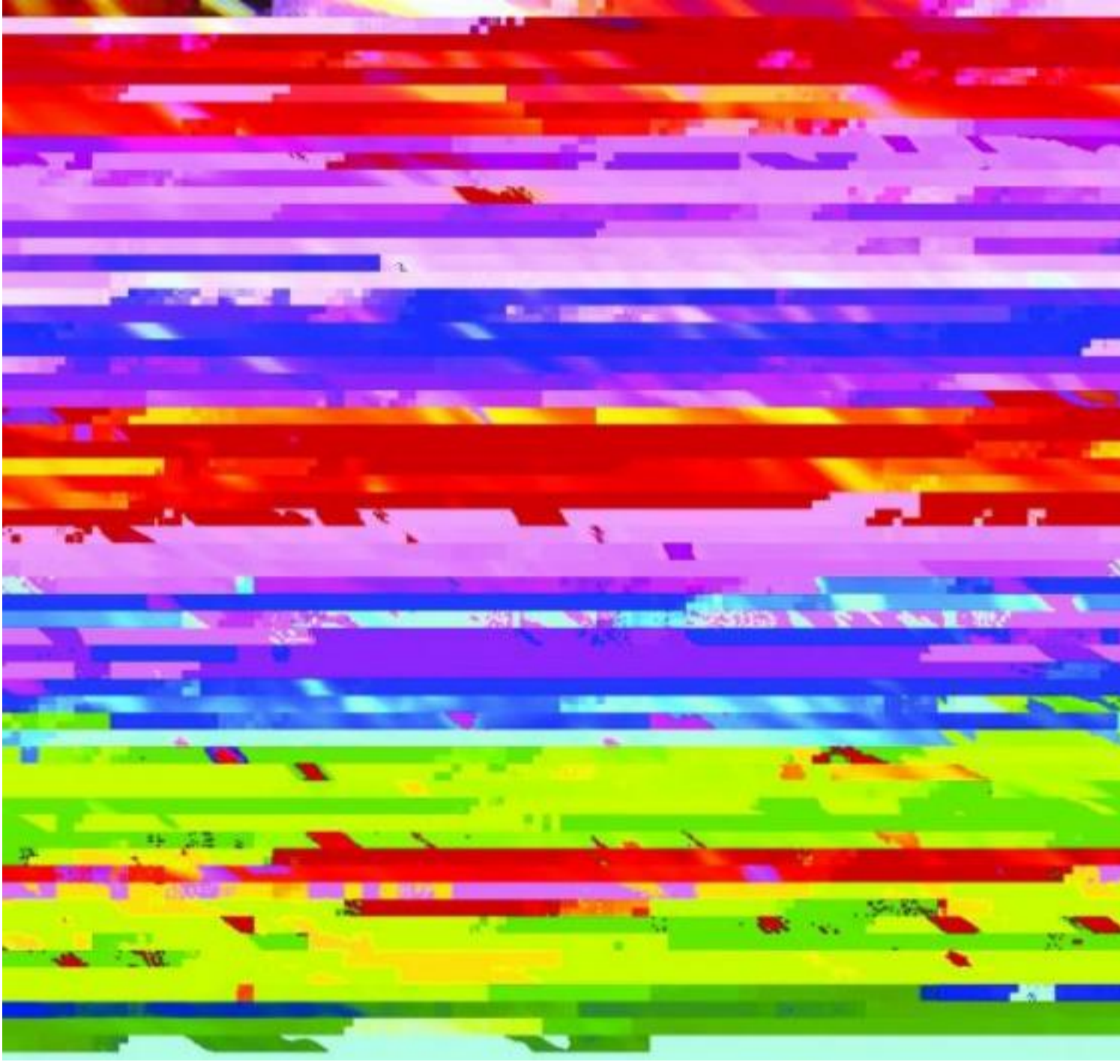
The website restoration therefore takes hold of the website's programming in the 2010's, but reinvents it with ingenuity. It also alerts the Internet user on how some multinationals IT companies (Apple, Google) consider the universality of the net: Chrome hinders some images display, while Safari denies their visualization. Also, in the latter case, Perconte and Choi have provided the following message to the attention of the user: "Safari is not ready for love. It's still blind." On the contrary, the Firefox browser, developed by a global open-source community, allows optimal operation of *I Love You* at the exact replica of the first 2004 version. Indeed, Mozilla defends a free Internet that would be "a global public resource that must remain open and accessible" in which "everyone should be able to shape the Internet and their own experiences on the Internet."[13] That is why the growing love of *I Love You* does not only symbolize the artist in his couple, but elevates itself to a principle of universal union and intimate communion through the web: a set of values that affirm a convivial conception of society resisting consumerist models imposed by technical industries, and taking the power of the Web back in the hands of all users.

I Love You is therefore crucial for the Internet user, the historian, the media theorist, the film analyst, the archivist and the curator of the twenty-first century. It invents a thought of the program as a plasticity fertilization tool through digital visualization technologies understood as open and unstable. It successfully manages to offer bright and virtuoso processes and techniques of recoding, exciting insights on the operation of some display supports and devices, along with their history and unrelenting criticism, and the refined and infinite visual writing of the story of a man in love through a limitless range of radical visual forms generating a pure aesthetic delight. It is an artwork that lives and grows thanks to the Internet users as a digital lining of a relationship blossoming in the world, and which, since it has adapted and transformed to the changing technological environment, becomes the figurehead of a libertarian conception of the Internet and digital technologies in general.

(In)exactitude in Science : http://inexactitudeinscience.com

and *I Love You* : http://iloveyou.38degres.net

Text is translated from the first french extended edition : http://www.debordements.fr/spip.php?article431

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[1] For New Forms Festival, Roundhouse Community Centre, Vancouver, Canada.

[2] Report to the interview with Jacques Perconte "Crossings", made by Raphaël Nieuwjaer : http://www.debordements.fr/spip.php?article434

[3] Report to the film *isz* (2003), a "digital bouquet" Perconte gave her as a Xmas gift, made of five

scanned petals: https://vimeo.com/27541314

[4] The early work by Jacques Perconte is exact contemporary of Achim Szepanski's "Mille Plateaux Manifesto" (1995) and what has been called the "aesthetic of glitch" first in music: http://www.mille-plateaux.net/theory/download/manifesto.pdf. The artwork of Perconte, sharing the same concerns, stands apart from this aesthetic since he transfigures the glitch.

[5] Perconte Jacques. Notes for *I Love You* (our translation): http://www.jacquesperconte.com/oe?88

[6] Perconte Jacques. op. cit.

[7] Or the "love hunt code": http://iloveyou.38degres.net/code/hunt.html

[8] Barthes Roland. *A Lover's Discourse. Fragments* (1977). trans. Richard Howard. New-York: Hill and Wang, 1978. p.99.

[9] This term is an extension of its already existing meaning: http://www.oxforddictionaries. It is not only a program given freely by the author to the Internet users, but literally a program that itself writes love in the code. Fundamentally opposed to a "*malware*" like the virus *iloveyou* which spread via email in May 2000 and destroyed the data of tens of millions of computers worldwide.

[10] Perconte Jacques. "Lovecounter. True Streamed Love Counter": http://iloveyou.38degres.net/More_Iloveyou.php

[11] Barthes Roland. "Gradiva". op. cit. pp.124-126

[12] Since 2004, Perconte has repeatedly rephotographed some images of *I Love You* displayed on his computer to extend his collections.

[13] "Mozilla Manifesto": https://www.mozilla.org/en-US/about/manifesto/details/

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