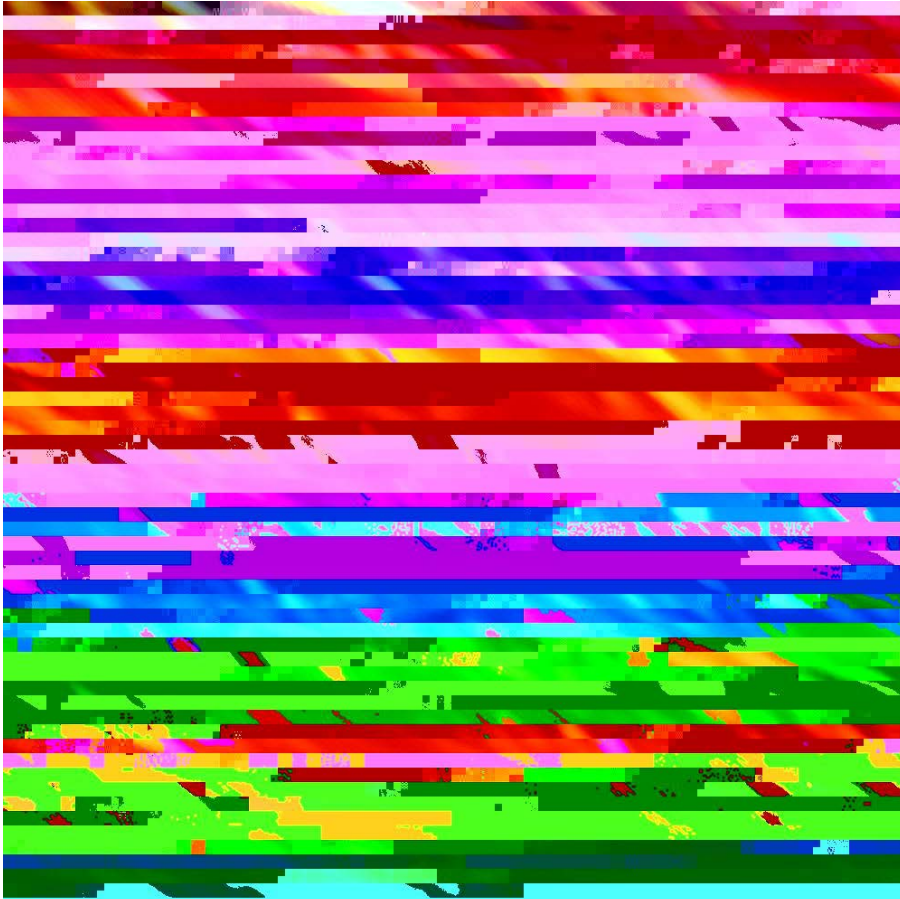# RECODING VISUALIZATION IN THE TIME OF WEB: THE CASE OF I LOVE YOU BY JACQUES PERCONTE (2004-2015)

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by Bidhan Jacobs

> "I-love-you: the figure refers not to the declaration of love, to the avowal,
>
> but to the repeated utterance of the love cry."
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> Roland Barthes, *The Lover's Discourse. Fragments*, 1977.

Introduction

Designed and published online on October 14th 2004[1], restored for The Wrong (Again) – New Digital Art Biennale on November 1st 2015, the website **I Love You** by French artist and net-art pioneer Jacques Perconte[2] is not only a wonderful achievement of his research on image files visualization through the Internet, but also a fundamental piece in his artwork, and this 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 (Le Bleu du ciel) of a book with the digital photographs of bodies he had been taking tirelessly by re-taking them, through the network, on television and computer screens or during digital projections; 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 twenty years of age, being one of the first to explore the emerging web space with some pioneers that had access to state-of-the-art connections and computer software and hardware in France. At the Bordeaux University, when Perconte notices that a computer he has access to 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": the website **sxktn** (1997), the image generator websites **ncorps 1.0** (1997), **ncorps 3.0** (1999) and **Tempo e pause** (2001), and the films **ncorps (corps numériques)** (1997), **ncx** (1999), **Ordinary Madness** (2001), **Matre zias e imaji imacul** (2001), **Phex** (2001) 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 encoded according to standards: it's a model, shaped by algorithms; its visualizations change only according to the supports and the formats (the display on a matrix of pixels or the print), the sizes, qualities and definition of the display device (projectors, monitors, home computers or mobile devices). 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 website *ncorps 1.0* was unpredictable since the data packets transited each time through different paths, the number of the intermediate servers was variable – especially as some servers didn't answer and a new node had to be found – and 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. The subject was most of the time visible, but the artifacts (…) linked it to its direct status of digital reproduction. Every now and then, the image would totally turn into an abstract composition with amazing colors and where the shapes, guided by mathematics, were organized according to what it had been possible to reproduce of the model. The more information were lacking, the less the image was recognizable.

The more the calculation had to make do with little, the more it quantified its freedom".[5] Consequently, these fluctuations of display unveil the unstable functioning of digital network technologies and a latent visual material; but they reveal above all a prodigiously fertile field of investigation: recoding the visualization. If this instability has gradually become imperceptible in the 2000's with the increased robustness and technological performances (tubes and computers), the material reality of signals' circulation and their processing through the network remains. 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 sequences (at the very beginning of the web, then JPEG) 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]*). As sophisticated as it is intuitive, this research allowed Perconte to establish, by 1996, a stable platform aimed at recoding the visualization within the web, from which he will grow ecosystems that will then become more complex and adaptable to the evolution of technologies, to ultimately break the limitations of the model's code into which the digital signal is reduced.
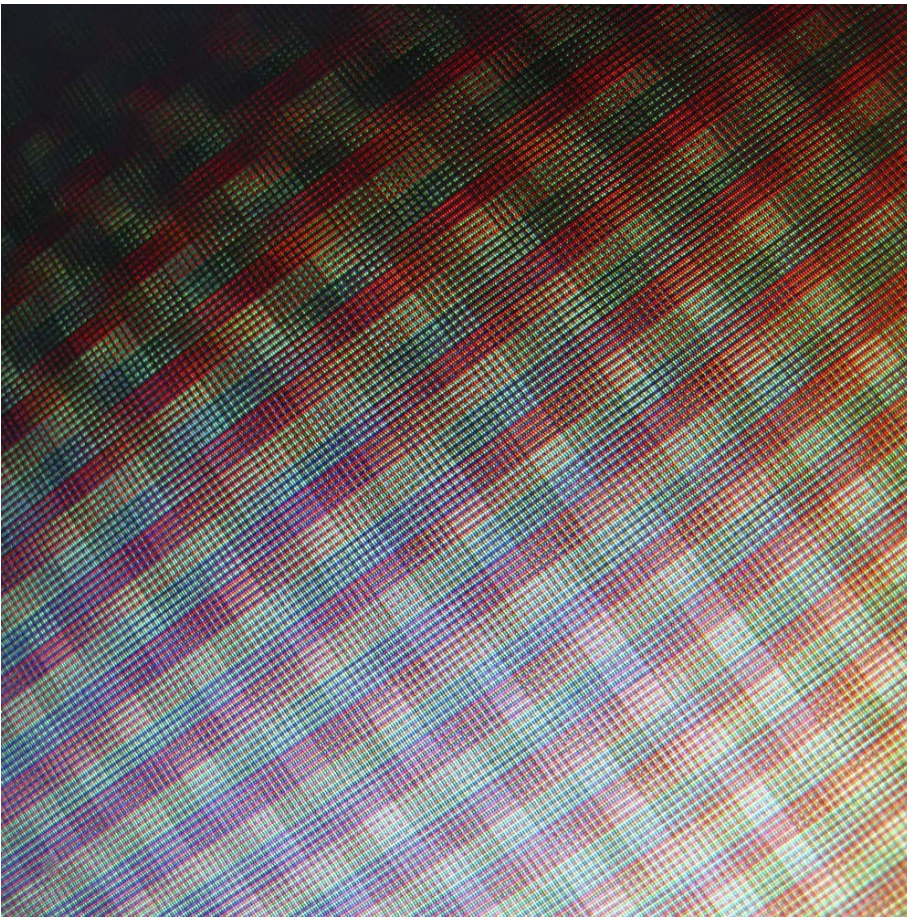
As he undertakes assembling photographs of Isabelle for the book project (**38 degrés**[6]), this long experience of the web will come back to him. The collection of several thousands digital pictures springs from the extensive exploration of the beloved body's patterns and the obtained signals he looped (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."[7] Furthermore, despite experimental photography techniques, he quickly reaches the limits of how much an image is capable of expressing absolute love, the visual result failing to rise to the challenge of the complexity, intensity and beauty of what he feels for Isabelle. In order to find and visualize this love present within these files, Perconte selects and ranks hundreds of these images in a database, according to their forms and colors, 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*[8], 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 – the server, the IP address of the user, date and time – but also the mathematical constants of proportions and universal harmony – ?[9] 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 (a pairing of numbers and letters) 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 (…)."[10] The broken icon evokes, according to the visual codes of the Internet, a digital iconoclasm, but furthermore signifies the limitations of visualization protocols; online programs and programming languages have been overtaken by an overflow inexpressible love. This substitution in the image source code of a hexadecimal value by the literal writing of love, raises the Perconte's program to a level of what we propose to name a "*loveware.*"[11]

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, in order to perfect the apparatus, 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, held in the form of HTML pages concatenating each 500 occurrences of the phrase (so that on October 31th 2015, 48,312,108 "I Love You's" have been substituted – a total of 96,625 pages); 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."[12] 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[13]), but one who loves. Then, the artist updates his website on a regular basis. For each exhibition, festival or meeting, he replaces the image collection and operates small technical changes in order to avoid falling behind on the developments of the web (to this date, eight versions of the site have been archived). 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 (he developed four versions until 2012[14]). 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.
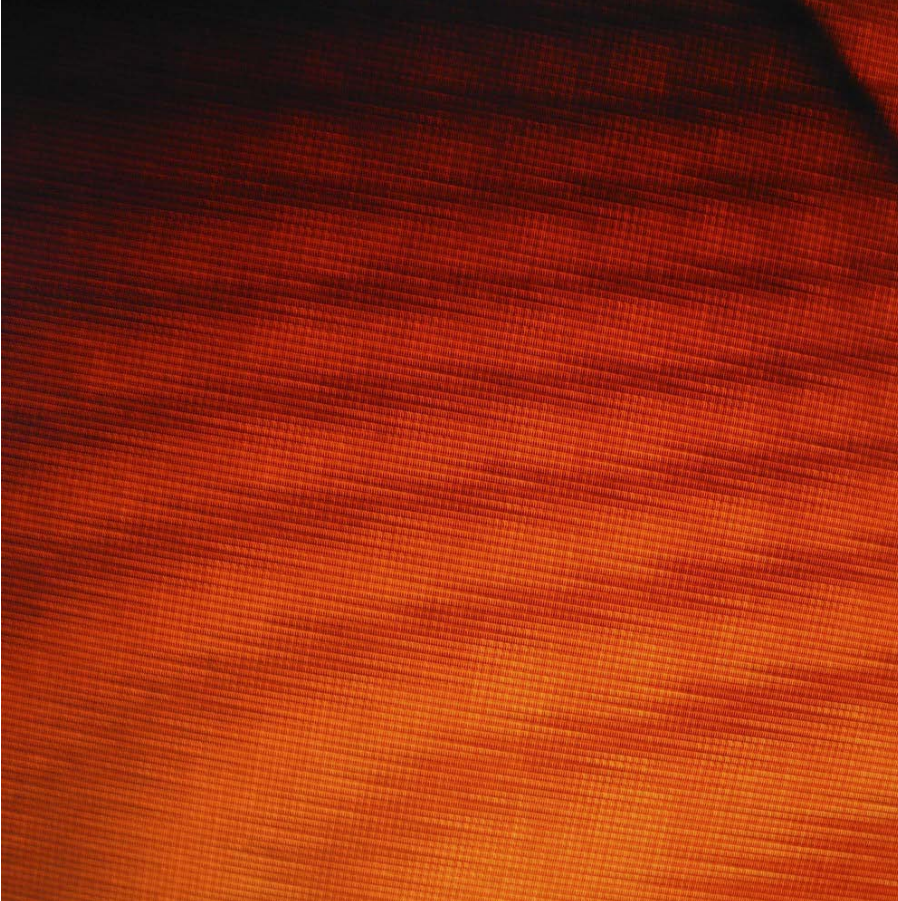
The invitation from The Wrong for New Digital Art Biennale gave him the opportunity to get back to this core piece. The solution – consisting in placing the website in its original technological context, that is to say, on a server with the same configurations as in 2004 – was met with refusal from the web hosting providers. This is how he decided to work with one of his brightest students of EMA Fructidor in Chalon-sur-Saône, Garam Choi, a true code virtuoso with an engineering background, 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 that interpreted PHP code and produced HTML pages, images and documents to send to the customer. 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, who has been working for years with a logic of autonomy regarding standards and a technical non-cooperation strategy, 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."[15] 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 generous and convivial conception of society resisting consumerist, discriminative and mutilating 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 archivist and the curator of the twenty-first century, but it also provides some analytical keys for film studies. Indeed, until 2015, the artist has infused his films with web culture and values. His work from the network's ecosystems – which unfolds all the images in a model – shapes the whole of his works devoted to moving digital images: on the one hand, he brings codecs in the field of experimental filmmaking, tools developed by the MPEG group for the codification, broadcasting, transmission and visualization of the digital signals for the web and the telecommunications network, and, since the early 2000's, all devices connected to the Internet; on the other hand, he pursues the adventure of plasticity offered by this powerful approach born in the web that is to explore the *n* possibilities of a model, cultivating an ecosystem of programs which moved largely from the network to the Perconte's hard drives, consisting in codecs, in scripts to automate certain tasks, in control lines in the graphic interface of its encoding software to set algorithms, in players, in special effects and editing softwares, in graphical programming. Secondly, the technique of substitution used to pirate the rigid and limited visualization program and that causes unexpected, flexible and complex operations of the circuit, is at work in some of the Perconte's films. For example, Oops I Did it Again (2002) which substitutes to the file made available by the artist via peer-to-peer and titled as the long-awaited erotic music video by Britney Spears for a fake music video; isz (2003) substitutes to the traditional detection of a rose petal it's linear detection by sensing contact (scanner); also Antoine et Léonard (2011) in which the behavioral algorithm Le Pixel Blanc by Antoine Schmitt (1996-2000) is introduced by Perconte in the image of the Mona Lisa so that its trajectory replaces and pushes, through compression effects, some pixels of the painting, or finally the camaïeu of green in Árvore da Vida (2013), obtained by setting GIFs with a few green tones of the original colors, which substitute themselves to all others.

I Love You was rightly celebrated November 1st 2015 by the New Digital Art Biennale: it invents a thought of the program as a plasticity fertilization tool through digital visualization technologies understood as open and unstable. **I Love You** 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. Last but no least, **I Love You** confirms that net-art and filmmaking need to be thought of together.

http://iloveyou.38degres.net

References

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

2. Report to Raphaël Nieuwjaer, "Crossings. Interview with Jacques Perconte," *Débordements* (2015), accessed June 5, 2015 : 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 appart from this aesthetic since he transfigures the glitch.

5. Jacques Perconte, "*I Love You,*" our translation, http://www.jacquesperconte.com/oe?88.

6. Abandonned project.

7. "*I Love You.*"

8. Or the "love hunt code": http://iloveyou.38degres.net/code/hunt.html.

9. The importance of ?i for the artist is such that, in 1999, he devoted an Internet piece, *Pi*, dedicated to the exploration of graphical representations of the constant: http://www.jacquesperconte.com/oe?121.

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

11. 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.

12. Jacques Perconte, "Lovecounter. True Streamed Love Counter," http://iloveyou.38degres.net/More_Iloveyou.php.

13. Barthes, "Gradiva", *Discourse*, 124-126.

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

15. "Mozilla Manifesto," https://www.mozilla.org/en-US/about/manifesto/details/.