

Aaron Swartz & Taryn Simon in conversation

New Museum of Contemporary Art,
Rhizome Seven on Seven Conference, April 14, 2012

TARYN SIMON: Aaron and I have been working together for the last twelve hours. I never imagined this pressure; my work usually takes years to complete so it's a little bit gut wrenching to go public with something after a 12-hour run.

In the end we decided to stick with simplicity. When we initially met in our room and were bouncing ideas back and forth, we were aiming to create a spectacle – an experience – something that wasn't related to an app or a consumer item. We spent a lot of time generating a project over the course of the day and acquired data and background information about every single individual in the audience. In the end, we learned our idea was not possible for legal reasons. (Laughs).

So, I guess this is an important aspect of art and technology colliding, because there are all of these possibilities that we could achieve but there are boundaries. These boundaries are becoming more and more clear and defined. That failure occupied a big chunk of our day. Then, after having spent so much time thinking about creating an experience within this space and contemplating the diversity of that experience, we started thinking about the diversity of experience across other spaces, which led us to a discussion on cross-cultural communication.

AARON SWARTZ: I should say as the nominal technologist that one of the interesting transitions for me was coming to this with the perspective of making something that is not purely an app or a program, as Taryn said, but provocative, something that is not only useful but raises deeper questions, and I think that is one of the interesting mergers we realized.

TS: But we couldn't do it. So here we were, end of the day last night; we took several walks, there were several moments of complete despair.

AS: It did not get videotaped, just to be clear. (Laughs). Do not try to search for the reality show.

TS: And then at around 8pm last night we arrived at what we will be presenting today. I have some notes here that we wrote at one in the morning so forgive me if I look at my computer from time to time. The project that we developed is investigating cultural differences and similarities through indexing visual material from different nations. This visual material is established through mediated filters. It's about how supposedly neutral and statistical analyses construct visions of ourselves.

AS: One of the things that people are paying more attention to, is the way that these sort of neutral tools, like Facebook and Google and so on, claim to present an almost unmediated view of the world all through statistics and algorithms and analyses, but in fact these are programmed and programming us. We wanted to find a way to visualize that, to expose some of the value judgments that get made.

TS: With all the claims of a homogenizing culture due to global economies and global financial systems and cultural systems imposing this exercise, we are forcing the user to search for difference or disconnects and making the viewer acknowledge the residual force as a cultural phenomenon. The project statistically looks at images associated with words – it can be descriptions, expressions, feelings – and it examines the differences and repetitions in popularly distributed visual material associated with these terms. The implications of technological advancements, economics, aesthetics, religion, governance, power, customs and other influences on cultural difference can be imagined through the comparison of images in local searches. Basically, at the end of it all, we tried to give the hidden space between cultures a visual route in a simple and easy-to-use form, and to highlight the complexities surrounding the possibility of a visual language.



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AS: So, in more technical terms, what we tried to do was to use the image searching tool of various local search engines to try to pick up what those search engines say are sort of the top, the most definitive images for a topic. And then we wanted to juxtapose those next to each other so you could see, you know, ok if this is the image in one country, what is it in another country and another and another. And of course to do that we also had to translate the query, so we composed, in the same way we were composing images, we composed these search tools to translate your query from one language to another and another so you see the word in that language, in that country and translated into a series of images.

TS: Yeah, so should we ... We are just going to show it to you now. It's roughly built; it will eventually include all nations. For now we are giving you an abridged look for this experience. So let's try "painting." (Scrolls through images) And, "freedom."

AS: I like the distinction between freedom in Brazil and Syria. (Laughs) And in Kenya, if you notice, apparently it means lots of meetings.

TS: "Crazy." In Russia it's a headless man looking at rows of heads to choose from.

AS: In France, "crazy" apparently means Homer Simpson.

TS: "Sadness." "Beauty." Too fast? Sorry.

AS: I think that one of the interesting distinctions is between human beauty and natural beauty.

TS: "Death."

TS: "America."

AS: The distinction between the US and Iranian views of America is striking.

TS: "Celebrity." In Syria it's the Mona Lisa and Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller. And in the US it's Paris Hilton.

"Jew." The word in German is "jude" so Jude Law's image surprisingly trumps any searches for Jew.

"Party." "Masculinity." Should we do me? Aaron did this yesterday and discovered for some reason in Israel I'm a hotdog.

AS: To be fair, they love you everywhere else.

TS: Should I keep going? Or does the audience want to yell out any? "Sex." Oh, this is interesting, "Obama." You will notice in North Korea, there is no image.

AS: Also, in Spain, Obama smokes.

TS: "Management." Syria is kind of interesting.

AS: In Syria, management comes from the barrel of a gun.

TS: "Luck." "Hairstyle." "Luxury." That's a good one.

AS: This is "corruption."

TS: So we'll just do a few more. "Riot." "Terrorist."

AS: So PETA is a leading terrorist in the United States.

TS: In Brazil it is a baby with a grenade.

AS: The baby has a bomb. Let's be clear.

TS: "Woman." "Family." Ok we can stop there.

AS: You are all welcome to continue playing along at home. Thank you.