

MAKING STRANGE DATA TANGIBLE

The recording of an improbable conversation between artist Maren van Molted and curator Tram Scawped.

Text by Tom Van Malderen¹

Both Maren Van Molted² and Tram Scawped³ had the feeling they might have met before, but couldn't remember where, nor when, or if at all. In any case, when they were introduced to each other at the opening of Conditions and Opportunities at DMW Artspace in Antwerp, they hit it off immediately. Tram's presence at the opening was obvious due to the fact that he curated Conditions and Opportunities, a collaboration between Kris Van Dessel and myself. For Maren it was her first visit to DMW Artspace. She had been following Kris' work for many years now and had gotten curious about his collaborative work. It was unsurprising that Tram eagerly asked Maren to join the artists, the gallery owner and their acquaintances when they had decided to continue the opening celebrations at a nearby, pretty hip, bar. It was at this smoky place, standing near the end of the bar counter, that I overheard the following improbable conversation:

Maren van Molted: I haven't totally figured it out yet, but I would like to hold Kris Van Dessel's work next to the data collection obsession we currently see in society; to approach his work from the perspective of this craze for data we are encountering.

Tram Scawped: That is a fascinating proposition. And certainly a very different take from my recent viewings of Kris' work as an investigation into the artistic and substantive possibilities of the art space, and as a questioning in general of the commitment of galleries and art spaces.

Well, I can't stop seeing some of his work as an extension to, or even a critique of, our contemporary data recording society. To make some first references, think of *QUALITY TIME*, where Kris has been recording his homely visits for the past 7 years whilst leaving some sort of visual database on the kitchen wall. Or his many collections of particles turning into forms of data. Think of *THE SECRET*, where the physical residues of an action turn into traces and data. Or *WATCH THE DUST*, his photographed database, so to speak, of the dust collected and filtered from his studio floor over a six year period.

The works you are bringing up also remind me of Walter Benjamin's essay on book collecting, where he proclaims that collecting 'is the most profound relation that one can have to things', and 'that collecting is a way of mediating on history'. Anyway, I am deviating now. Let's talk about Kris the 'collector' on another occasion and get back to data.

I like your perspective too and it is not necessarily unrelated, but I am glad you want to explore my trail of thoughts. In my opinion, willingly or not, Kris draws from several dimensions of the data business. He is gathering, collecting and transferring all sorts of data, almost as obsessively as our society. To the point that his collecting highlights the lunacy that everything and everyone is to be turned into data. In other words, to refer to the tongue-in-cheek words of writer Shumon Basar: "the human being is defined by data more than we are by our red cells, raging hormones and militantly groomed hair (or not, depending)."

(both laughing) Luckily, there are some raging hormones and groomed hair left in this bar! Your thoughts also remind me of the work *DISTANCE SLIDES* with its collection or database of fine dust and bugs.

Precisely, and on top of it, for the creation of *DISTANCE SLIDES* Kris mounted the sticky slides on his bike. Purposely or not, this is very similar to the increasingly popular wearable fitness devices that people are willingly attaching or 'mounting' to their bodies for the purpose of transferring their bodily motions into trackable data. Silicon valley has become obsessed with the idea that we can feed big data into algorithms and expect evermore

neatly projected futures. Corporations are trying to use these kinds of analytics to optimize supply chains, labour, sales and what not. From my perspective, Kris is subtly mocking and playing with this obsession, with this fuelling of a fascination that the more figures you input, the more precise the prediction you get, beckoning us to believe that nearly everything can be broken down and quantified...

...like he does in *RENT / CURRENT / GAS* with the neatly breaking down of his studio's yearly expenses in pixels. Or Kris' personal and ironic take on the popularity of home energy management in *9 KW*. Or the magnificently absurd recording of the volume of paint needed for his studio in a mesmerizing collapsed block of data called *CONDENSE*, using the A4 size metrics system. Your view is really growing on me and I start perceiving a myriad of Kris' works as the warped output of some sort of hardcore data miner or a statistics whiz. As a man who makes strange data tangible!

There are in fact so many works with some form of embedded data to refer to if you like. Look at the ink for example, both in dry and liquid form, becoming a carrier of data in *AS THE CROW FLIES* and *THE ATLANTIC*. Let me jump to Artificial Intelligence (AI) now. This phenomena is empowered by an accumulation and manipulation of ever expanding data and algorithms. And think of Kris' work *AURORA* and *X to Y (and back again)* where he relies on google translate-an excellent example of AI- for the making of his artistic output or 'reality'. I see Kris playing with the potential unreliability of data and the inconsistencies of information. He makes poetic abuse of the anomalies and deficiencies that are still present in the data out there and exposes that the 'machine' is sometimes learning the wrong lesson. It makes his work a bitter-sweet commentary on the increasingly relativity of the truth.

By putting it that way, I could add that Kris's work also hints at the end of the age of 'reason'. I heard philosopher and political theorist Achille Mbembe explaining that reason is increasingly morphing from within machines and its abstractions, rather than from people. That the human being is no longer the privileged place of reason and computation. Kris is clearly playing with this notion. AI is considered the next step up from the invention of the printing press which had warped us in the age of reason at the cost of the age of religion. Therefore, we can conclude that AI, with its reliance on machines powered by data and algorithms, is arriving at the cost of the age of reason, including the ethical or philosophical norms that are attached to it.

Did Henry A. Kissinger not recently raise the issue that AI presents a mathematical process as if it were a thought process? That, due to AI becoming increasingly powerful and omnipresent, we risk to either trying to mimic that mathematical process ourselves or merely accepting the results. And in doing so, we are in danger of losing the thinking capacity that has been the very essence of the human cognition. We are unfortunately far away from enabling AI to comprehend the context that informs its instructions. That's very clear from the sometimes very odd, estranging google translations that come through Kris' work. His use of the googlespere rubs the diminishing human competence, together with the turning of the human condition into data, in our faces.

In fact, in the book *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, historian Yuval Noah Harari examines the possible impact of biotechnological and artificial intelligence innovation on Homo sapiens, heralding perhaps the beginning of a new bionic or semi-computerised form of human. He strongly believes that Homo sapiens as we know them will probably disappear within a century or so, not destroyed by killer robots or things like that, but changed and upgraded with biotechnology and artificial intelligence into something else, into something different. Keeping this in mind, It is very possible we will no longer understand Kris's work the way we do today!

Well, could this bring us to the 'fiction' or 'narrative' behind some of Kris' work? At the centre of Harari's first book *Sapiens* is the contention that what made Homo sapiens the

most successful human being, supplanting rivals such as Neanderthals, was our ability to believe in shared fictions. Religions, nations and money, he argues, are all human fictions that have enabled collaboration and organisation on a massive scale. Could data be the new fiction to be? The new media theorist Lev Manovich, starts in his late nineties paper *Database as a Symbolic Form*, with pointing out that after the novel, and subsequently cinema privileged narrative as the key form of cultural expression of the modern age, the computer age is introducing now its own version in the form of the database. According to him, many new media objects do not tell stories; they don't have beginning or end; in fact, they don't have any development, thematically, formally or otherwise which would organize their elements into a sequence.

So you are hinting at the possibility of Kris telling stories with objects that generally do not tell stories? That, in doing so, he is announcing 'data' as the next great human fiction?

I think he does indeed! Manovich talks about the user experience of such computerized collections or databases and how it is quite distinct from reading a narrative or watching a film or navigating an architectural site. He argues that literary or cinematic narrative, an architectural plan, or a database each present a different model of what a world is like. With his paper he is trying to address this sense of database as a cultural form of its own. And very importantly, he also expresses that it is only appropriate that we would want to develop poetics, aesthetics, and ethics departing from the database. This is exactly what Kris, at least in my mind, is doing in a segment of his work. If I remember well, Manovich also delves into different types of digital storage media that proved to be particularly receptive to database-like structures, and how these, in turn, inspired new database genres. And he goes on about the Internet as the place where the database form really flourished.

And, it is hard not to see Kris experimenting with, questioning, and exploiting many of these digital storage media! Thinking of the USB stick in *ENTERED METERS GOING NOWHERE* with his database of meters expressed in mountains. Or *EQUALIZE* with its the QR-code and access to *EQUALIZE CRACKS* on the internet. Or the many CD-ROMs containing *REALLY STARTING* and *THE MIX*, just to name a few.

Voila! I hope you would agree with me that Kris is definitely developing poetics and aesthetics out of, and with data. Making it even more layered, Kris offsets these new media experiments with experiments using older media. For example in *99.6FM*, one of several collaborations with Peter Lemmens, where data is transferred by means of the compact cassette tape and the real-time transmission via a traditional broadcasting experience. Also in *WE WANT THE AIRWAVES*, where he offsets the idea that digital data is stored in the cloud against ghost signals that are left behind by obsolete AM and FM broadcasts.

Not to mention the many works in which he records data on clear, black or white vinyl!

Indeed! And by re-appropriating these older media, he turns them into some sort of living ruins. He creates a patchwork in which different times and space overlap, an intricate topography where past, present and future can co-exist. He is transferring recording systems. He exchanges, captures and shifts realities.

Well...the art critic Julie Rodeyns once wrote that: "Nevertheless, Van Dessel neatly collects all his 'waste'. For him, everything has value and the potential to transform into something new." Could we add to this that Kris Van Dessel also neatly collects his 'data!'?

I think we got a case

At this point Maren and Tram realized that they were the only persons left in the bar even trying to make sense of things. Maybe the time had come for them to give up and give in and join the celebrating artists, gallery owner and their friends on the dancefloor at the back of the pub. Nonetheless, they both went home with their conversation in mind. Somehow it

remained all a bit hazy and uncertain, very much like this big data issue itself. But as they say....the fact that something is hard to measure, doesn't mean it is not real.

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