

IMAGE Jonathan Harris and Sep Kamvar, *We Feel Fine* 2005, Courtesy of the Artists

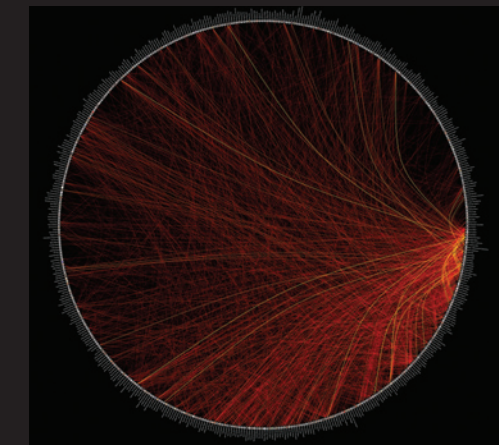
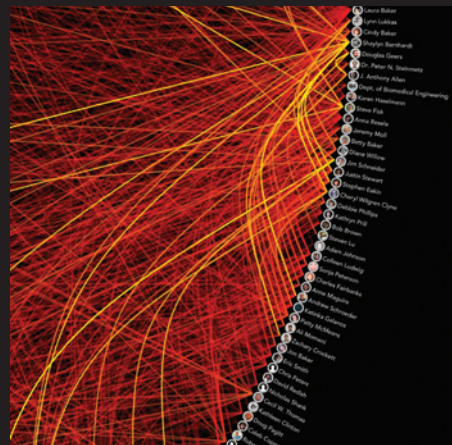


IMAGE Christopher Baker, *My Map (A Self-Portrait)* 2007-2013, Courtesy of the Artist



artists

Christopher Baker
 R. Luke DuBois
 Jonathan Harris, Sep Kamvar
 Norimichi Hirakawa
 Aaron Koblin
 Golan Levin, Kamal Nigam, Jonathan Feinberg

Jordan Lane
 Nathalie Miebach
 Mitchell Whitelaw
 Martin Wattenberg, Fernanda Viégas

the team

CURATORIAL TEAM
 Senior Curator Digital Media - Lubi Thomas
 Exhibitions Officer - Rachael Parsons
 Intern Assistant Curator - Ashlee Sang

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 Jon McCormack
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IMAGE Aaron Koblin, *The Sheep Market* 2008, Courtesy of the Artist

datascape

Contemporary society is in the midst of the boundless generation and collection of data, data that is produced from almost any measurable act. Be it weather or transport data sets published by government agencies, or the individual and interpersonal data generated by our digital interactions; a server somewhere is collating. With the rise of this digital data phenomenon comes questions of comprehension, purpose, ownership and translation. Without mediation digital data is an immense abstract list of text and numbers and in this abstracted form data sets become detached from the circumstances of their creation. Artists and digital creatives are building works from these constantly evolving data sets to develop a discourse that investigates, appropriates, reveals and reflects upon the society and environment that generates this medium.

Datascape presents a range of works that use data as building blocks to facilitate connections and understanding around a range of personal, social and worldly issues. The exhibition is concerned with creating an opportunity for experiential discovery through engaging with work from some of the world's prominent creatives in this field of practice. Utilising three thematic lenses: Generative Currents, the Anti-Sublime and the Human Context, the works offer a variety of pathways to traverse the *Datascape*.

Lubi Thomas and Rachael Parsons, QUT Creative Industries Precinct

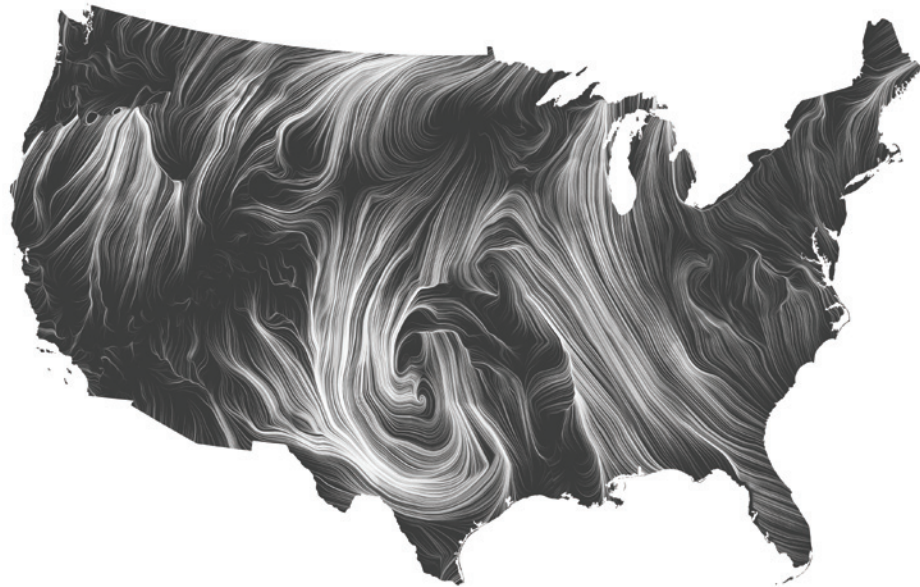


IMAGE Fernanda Viégas and Martin Wattenberg, *Windmap* 2012, Courtesy of the Artist

“Data is the new oil” - Ann Hummer, Hummer-Winblad Venture Partners¹

In the swirling chaos of twenty-first century capitalism, everybody wants to know what's next. “Data is the new oil” is a pithy little announcement. It reminds us how we got here, powered by the long energetic boom of fossil fuels, now entering its closing stages. It announces a successor, a new wealth (and just in time). But in drawing the analogy, it also constructs data in a certain way; as a sort of amorphous but precious *stuff*, a resource for exploitation, and a sort of promising abundance. Similarly *The Economist* trumpeted the “Data Deluge” on their February 2010 cover: a businessman catches falling data in an upside-down umbrella, funnelling it to water a growing flower whose leaves are hundred dollar bills.

We need not (and should not) accept this analogy; but it demonstrates how data is figured, or constructed, in our culture. Our everyday life and culture is traced, tangled and enabled by digital flows. We produce and consume data as never before. But what exactly *is* this data? What can it do, and what can we do with it? Who owns or controls it? How can we understand, appreciate, or even *sense* it? The construction of data as a cultural actor is vital because data itself is so abstract, so hard to pin down. We ought not leave it to the captains of industry, and their upside-down umbrellas. In *Datascape* we see artists working with data, applying and diverting it for their own ends, as well as offering their own figurations of its potentials and limits. In a culture increasingly built on data, these works provide moments of cultural introspection, reflections on this abstract stuff that is our new social medium.

Google, Facebook, Twitter and the rest make us - their users - into data. This makes us anxious about privacy and surveillance, but perhaps a more interesting question is what it's like to *be* data. If we are all data subjects now, then what is data subjectivity? Jordan Lane's *Digital Native Archive* imagines a new bureaucratic archive for the data subject, and immediately comes to the question of mortality. If we are data, and data can be faithfully preserved, are we now immortal? Or are we, instead, dead forever, entombed in a rationalised hierarchy of metadata, request protocols and archival record formats? Christopher Baker's *My Map* shows us what it might be to take charge of a personal archive, with a tool that reveals the patterns and relationships in email correspondence. This self-portrait suggests that one of the challenges of data subjectivity is simply knowing oneself: the scale of our personal data exceeds our grasp.

In two of the most prominent data art works from the mid 2000s, we mine these personal archives en masse. Levin's *The Dumpster* and Kamvar and Harris' *We Feel Fine* scour the internet for “feelings” that are compiled into datasets, and in turn staged as dynamic visualisations. In turning our digital selves into swarming dots and bouncing balls, the artists animate us as members of a teeming throng. Data here is in part a new form of social realism, a way to represent the complex texture of life in the crowd; but these works also ask us to reflect on the limits of data-subjectivity. Can the intensity of our inner lives really be represented in cool, abstract data? Are we all so much alike? Aaron Koblin's *Sheep Market* answers both yes and no; for we can see here both the comical diversity of the crowd (and its sheep avatars), and the uniformity that digital systems encourage.

The pathos of this contrast, between the coolness of the digital and the warm, messy intensity of humankind, emerges again in Luke du Bois' *Hard Data*, where the tolls of war unfold as stark lists and map references. DuBois' soundtrack, generated from the same source data, acts as an emotional mediator, trying to return some of the tragic importance that the data fails to convey. DuBois' work pivots between the data-subject and what we might call the data-world. For if the world, too, is now data, then what might that feel like? How do we approach such a world?

In many works here the weather - a complex (and increasingly uncooperative) material flux - is a sort of proxy for the data-world: a field that is both easy to measure, and difficult to grasp. In Miebach's *Weather Scores*, Viegas and Wattenberg's *Wind Map*, and my own *Measuring Cup*, weather data is a source of aesthetic richness, as well as a pointer to the world beyond, the world that data traces. The weather - so much part of our everyday sensations - is abstracted here into numbers and symbols, only to be remade in new sensual forms. What if we could see the wind across an entire continent? Or hold a hundred years of temperature? Or hear the tides as music?

Here we get a glimpse of an alternative figuration of data itself. Rather than some kind of precious (but immaterial) stuff, or fuel for market speculation, data here is a relationship, a link between one part of the world with another, and a trace that can be endlessly reshaped. Of course, that trace is imperfect; a mediated pointer, not a pure reproduction. So Viegas and Wattenberg issue a disclaimer for their *Wind Map*: this is just an “art project”, they say; we “can't make any guarantees about the correctness of the data or our software.” Yet that connection remains; and art here plays the role that it always has. It transforms our understanding of the world, by representing it anew.

Mitchell Whitelaw
Canberra, March 2013

¹ Rotella P: Is Data The New Oil. [Internet]. New York: Forbes; 2012 [cited 2013 Mar 27]. Available from: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/perryrotella/2012/04/02/is-data-the-new-oil/>



IMAGE Norimichi Hirakawa, *The Irreversible* 2010 (detail), Courtesy of the Artist