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ART

Installations for the Information Age

Pasadena Museum of California Art's 'Data + Art' exhibition encompasses weird science, animation, images and music.
By Hugh Hart

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"This year alone, more data will be generated than in the cumulative history of humanity," says Dan Goods. "Stuff is being collected in all sorts of interesting forms and piling up somewhere. What do we do with it?" It's an apt question for the Too Much Information Age, and to address the query, Goods and co-curator David Delgado have rounded up a collection of geek-friendly installations on display through April 12 at Pasadena Museum of California Art's "Data + Art" exhibition.

Inspired in part by Edward Tufte's landmark 1983 book, "The Visual Display of Quantitative Information," Goods and Delgado, both Jet Propulsion Laboratory staffers, view the show as a "curiosity shop" encompassing weird science, animation, images and music. Pieces include Long Now Foundation's "Rosetta Disk," a 2.8-inch-wide wafer micro-inscribed with 13,000 pages of documentation representing more than 1,500 languages and intended for the edification of alien civilizations. Chris Chafe and Greg Niemeier's "Untitled" installation uses sensors that measure carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, then programs the data to trigger guitar sounds.

Then there's the explosion of sharp-edged shards titled "Spam Architecture." MIT Media Lab researcher Alex Dragulescu designed the piece by translating key words and text patterns from unsolicited e-mails into a 3-D embodiment of junk messages. Delgado notes, "These bizarre objects with sharp, aggressive corners make you connect with the piece in a similar way perhaps that you feel about spam in the first place."

Information overload is processed in a more benign fashion by "Data + Art" contributor Jim Bumgardner. A California Institute of the Arts graduate and former Yahoo employee who now programs software for Santa Monica-based website TopSpinMedia .com, Bumgardner says, "I'm one of these people who's halfway between art and the nerd-dom world. I've tried to use both sides of the brain as much as possible."

To craft his group portrait of user-generated images titled "A Year of Sunsets," Bumgardner wrote software scripts that collected 15,000 user-generated photos uploaded to the Flickr .com website in 2008. Sorted chronologically from left to right, the thumbnail images form an undulating curve that peaks in summer, when sunsets occur later in the day, and dips as the equinox approaches.

"We've become very good at creating this deluge of data, yet we lack the capacity to make sense of it all," says Bumgardner. "Every day at Flickr.com, literally thousands of pictures are uploaded -- sunsets, kittens, puppies and weddings -- and there's no way you could see them all. Rather than the needle-in-the-haystack experience, the 'Sunsets' project gives me a mile-high view and allows people to get some enjoyment from the aggregate."

Artist-programmer Aaron Koblin similarly rejiggered a vast assortment of informational nuggets as his source material. His "Flight Patterns" animation is based on 24 hours' worth of airplane tracking data provided by the Federal Aviation Administration. He explains, "Every three minutes I received locations of flight routes and interpolated those values to create an animation of where every plane is flying."

Koblin, who earned a master of fine arts degree from UCLA's design/media arts program and now works for Google, says, "I was interested in seeing the way 'Flight Patterns' kind of slices up the country waking up, going to sleep and moving around. You can see the ebb and flow as plane routes erupt on the East Coast in the morning, flow over to the West Coast and eventually to Hawaii. When you zoom in, the animation becomes extremely abstract with these weird hubs spewing out all these particles."

Koblin also offers an intriguing exercise in hive-mind artistry titled "10,000 Cents." After writing software code that divided a \$100 bill into tiny interlocking segments, he hired a multitude of anonymous collaborators via Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk application to draw tiny pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. "We fed each user an original piece of the image and, next to it, a little drawing space where they could either make a trace drawing of the image fragment or replicate it by hand using their mouse," says Koblin, who deliberately kept the contributors in the dark about the overall project.

Paid one penny per task, several anonymous collaborators failed to follow instructions. "When you look close up you see that many of these hand-drawn images are actually stick figures or smiley faces or a heart," Koblin says. "Even though many people didn't do as they were asked, it all blends together." Individual quirks are, in fact, part of the charm for Koblin. That urge to coax a measure of humanity from technology-driven infrastructure recurs throughout "Data + Art," which also offers historic artifacts, including the first image of Mars transmitted from the Mariner 4 spacecraft in 1968. Facing an avalanche of bits and bytes that show no signs of abating, show organizer Goods regards raw information, in and of itself, as a worthy muse.

"We think there's a lot of potential in this area. On one end of the spectrum you've got people working with data to advance scientific knowledge. On the other end, people use data to explore boundaries and form. We wanted to take a look at pieces that touch your emotions created by artists who look at information as just another medium. Instead of using paint, they use data."

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