

## Golan Levin on Overview Visualizations

SOU, ART 507 Art of Data

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In data visualization, **holism** is the presentation of a dataset, often in its entirety, using strategies that organically reveal underlying forces.

The age of high-resolution media, Web-scale datasets, and computational power opens new vistas of artistic and aesthetic possibility. At the *Ars Electronica Festival* in Linz, Austria in 2012, computational artist Golan Levin promoted the artistic potential of visualizations and 'poetic approaches to the overview'. He explored several techniques that go beyond traditional presentations of data, such as artists' collections, image averaging, and holisms.

Levin explores a number of approaches to organizing collections of objects or data as art. Collections can be creating using accumulation, filtering, or rearrangement. Accumulation is exemplified by Bernd and Hilla Becher's grids ("small multiples") of architectural photos, Portia Munson's *Pink Project* (1994), and Aaron Koblin's *The Sheep Market*. By deliberately removing data, the artist can draw attention to what remains, such as Kathy Prendergast's *Lost* (1999), which only labels locations that start with the word 'lost'. Examples of visualization by rearrangement include Tim Hawkinson's *Alphabetized Alphabet* (1992), and Evan Roth's *SkyMall Liberation Project* (2012)

Collections of images, stills or motion pictures, can be averaged into a single image representing the entire collections. These "image averages" and morphs present the entire dataset at once and can be presented in such a way that they reveal an underlying scheme or unity. For example, David Tinapple's *Video Faces* (2007) exposes social dynamics, target markets, and political agendas by showing the 'average face' on various television networks.

Levin presents several canonical holistic visualizations. Lisa Jevbratt's *Every 1:1* (1999) presented the service type of every address in the IPv4 space as color in a two dimensional print. Komar and Melamid determined the *Most Wanted Painting* (1995) by surveying the public. Finally, Levin explores his own interactive project, *The Secret Lives of Numbers* (2002), in greater detail. This project is rich in previously unconsidered artifacts, such as the human preference for round numbers and numbers that repeat.

Two interesting examples of image averaging explore changing standards of beauty. Both artists may have started with an interest in cultural norms and expectations. They may have asked the question, "How are our standards of beauty changing?" Nancy Burson's *Composites* (1982) presents two images: a composite of movie stars and famous beauties from the 1950s and 60s and another composite of famous women of the early 1980s. The change from feminine, bright, round faces and wavy hair to narrower, more sultry faces and straight hair demonstrates the evolution of our collective cultural preferences. Jason Salavon's *Every Playboy Centerfold (The Decades)* presents a shift in sexual idealization toward thinner, blonder women, at least as curated by one magazine's editorial staff. An example of emergent information that might not have been initially asked, but is revealed by the image averaging, is the emergence of a high-

saturation, blonde-on-blue aesthetic, a variant of the "blue and orange" color scheme that dominates pop culture visuals in film, games, and magazines.

All of this work exists somewhere on a spectrum between dispassionate data presentation and aesthetic expression. NASA's *Earth at Night* (2000) is 100% data. However, the visualization evokes a visceral intellectual and emotional response. Additionally, the mere act of choosing a particular map projection expresses certain subjective biases, a shortcoming that was later addressed by re-presenting the image as an animated globe. Is it art? The image was certainly intended to inspire and stimulate, but it is not primarily a work of personal expression. The credit is given only to NASA, though it was compiled by a specific individual (Robert Simmon). Other works, such as the *Baby Name Voyager* and even *The Secret Lives of Numbers* are even further in the direction of purely functional data presentation. Regardless of where a creation falls on the spectrum, questions of artistic 'validity' are unsolvable. Artifacts become art when either they are presented as art or we explore them as such.