Aaron Koblin and Allison Parrish
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Artists Aaron Koblin and Allison Parrish explore aesthetic possibilities released by digital technology.

In his 2011 TED talk entitled "Visualizing ourselves ... with crowd-sourced data", **Aaron Koblin** explores large datasets through interactive visualizations. The common thread of his work is an exploration of sociological behavior presented as interactive media. Koblin asserts that digital, participatory interfaces are the defining medium of the 21st century, supplanting fixed media such as cinema and, before that, the novel.

Koblin builds visual imagery from data sets of two distinct types. First, information about technology use, gathered from corporate or government providers, forms the basis of his projects *Flight Patterns*, *Globe Encounters*, and *Amsterdam SMS*. These projects demonstrate how exploring large data sets can reveal underlying patterns of sociological behavior. For example, airline flights are profoundly in synchronicity with diurnal cycles and SMS usage exposes cultural phenomena such as holidays. While he might have guessed at some general results, it seems clear that viewing a massive number of events as a holism allows us to explore unforeseen phenomena, such as aircraft holding patterns around busy airports or the strength of relationship between New York City and locations around the world throughout the day.

Koblin's second data-source strategy is to amass content by request through massively multi-participant digital platforms. These projects explore the creative potential of crowd-sourcing, with mixed results. His pioneering project *The Sheep Market*, for example, is amusing but not especially beautiful. *Bicycle Built For Two Thousand*, while a clever premise, is aesthetically appalling. His process deliberately leaves participants in the dark and therefore emotionally detached. The consequences of purposelessness are demonstrated by holding the results in contrast with, say, Eric Whitacre's virtual choir projects. Koblin's later collaborations with Chris Milk, however, such as *Johnny Cash Project*, tap into a shared sense of purpose and emotion within a community to generate a coherent, purposeful, more emotive final product.

In contrast to Aaron Koblin's interactive visual mediums, **Allison Parrish** is an experimental computer poet dealing primarily in words. Her 2015 presentation "Exploring (Semantic) Space With (Literal) Robots" shares her stochastic Twitter bots and the data sources and procedures that power them. Parrish consciously compares herself to pioneering explorers, in particular un-piloted efforts such as radiosonde weather balloons and space probes. Instead of physical frontiers, however, her automated bots seek out unexplored lexical territories. For example, @everyword tweets a word every 30 minutes for years until every English word has been tweeted. @powervocabtweet tweets fictitious words and plausible definitions using Markov chains fed by a traditional dictionary. @libraryofemoji proposes new emojis, often with humorous results.

Her concept of 'semantic space' is most clearly expressed by her data visualizations of word adjacency. Parrish created visualizations of n-gram-based "lexical space" in two and three dimensions, exploring the number of times words have been published in conjunction to one another. We can then examine prominent combinations or, like pointing the Hubble telescope at

a dark patch of space, zoom in to dark areas to articulate combinations of words that have perhaps never before been seen or heard.

These two artists are similar in several ways. Most obviously, they use technology platforms as mediums for both the creation and the presentation of their art. Additionally, Koblin and Parrish concern themselves with the consequences of removing human intention or understanding from the creative process. To this end, Koblin frequently collects his raw materials from unwitting participants. Parrish removes other people entirely from her creation process, relying instead on existing data sources and stochastic techniques such as Markov chains. For her, the participation of humans is as interpreters and finders of meaning.

Both artists take responsibility as crafters of the procedures that generate their works. Koblin establishes the guidelines of crowd-sourcing requests. He also curates and organizes the results. Parrish takes it a step further. She is careful to point out that, although she works with holisms or randomized lexical constructions, she bears the ethical responsibility as the creator. If a randomly generated text is hateful or offensive, the coder is responsible. Consequently, she take precautions to ensure that her bots only 'punch up' and are very unlikely to attack marginalized groups. Aaron Koblin, on the other hand, raises questions about the ethics of paying people a pittance to contribute to his work while keeping them in the dark about the role of their contributions. While he delights in its potential for content generation, he feels that Amazon Mechanical Turk could point to a dystopian future of drudging labors divorced from meaning.

The artists' expectations for their works differ. Koblin expects visualizations of aggregates to illuminate behavior and raise interesting new questions of potentially practical interest. For example, he iterated on *Flight Patterns* to explore new dimensions such as altitude changes and local behavior around airports. He explores how masses of people collectively use SMS. He wants to share the range of creative possibilities for artists following instructions. In contrast, Parrish has a childlike, curiosity-driven approach that approaches naiveté. She presumes little practical or emotive substance in her bots and is primarily driven by a desire to map the borders between sense and nonsense.

I don't believe that Koblin always quite knows what he will get. He is willing to create a process that may result in work that is aesthetically weak in a traditional sense, as in the case of *Bicycle Made For Two Thousand*. However, his commitment to the potential of crowd-sourced art generation pays off in later collaborations. Parrish's work is clearer to visualize in advance. Because she is designing the algorithms, she may be surprised by individual results, but has a clear picture of the general shape of her output.

In short, Aaron Koblin and Allison Parrish both effectively use technology to create and present digital artwork that illuminates the quantitative and qualitative character of large datasets.