



# DEEP CODE

**Artists and poets are manipulating language in ways that challenge digital culture's most persistent myths.**

Jordan Wolfson:  
*Con Leche* (detail),  
2009, video,  
22-minute loop.  
Courtesy Sadie  
Coles HQ, London.

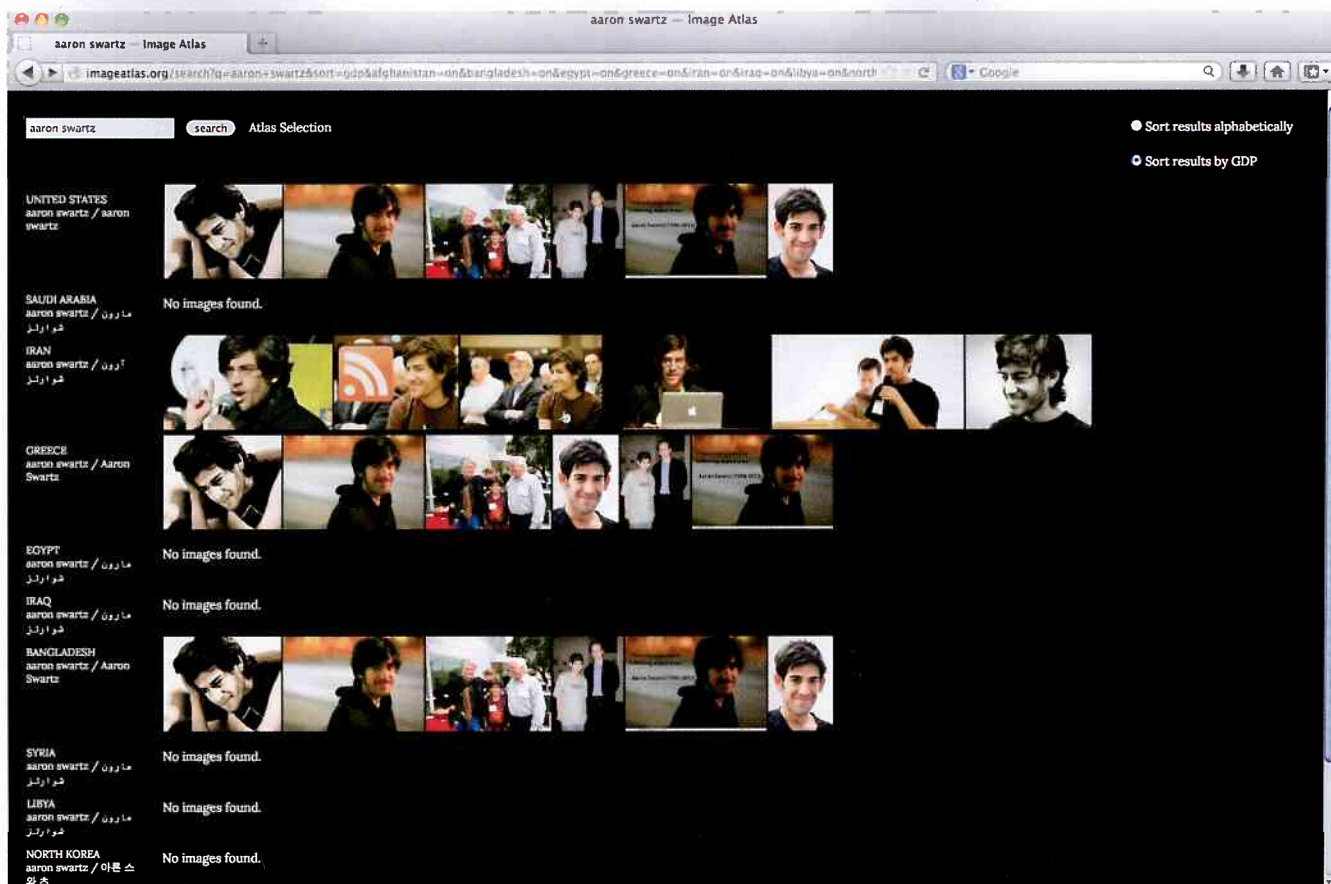
**By Kareem Estefan**

THE POPULARIZATION OF the World Wide Web 20 years ago gave rise to some extravagant predictions. The new communication network, we were told, heralded the arrival of a proverbial Borgesian library, an infinite archive containing all of the world's knowledge. "If it's not on the Internet, it doesn't exist" became a mantra.<sup>1</sup> Key to the continued relevance of this cultural myth of an omniscient Web is its deviation from Borges's image of the library as an impenetrable labyrinth; the librarian has been replaced by a calculation—the Google Search algorithm—that instantaneously conjures up the sought information.

The spread of image-uploading, live-streaming and video-chat capabilities further transformed our networked devices; our screens became windows onto what was happening now, anywhere in the world. To some, easy navigation and widespread access to unfathomable quantities of information signaled the dawn of a techno-utopia characterized by a democratic leveling of discourse, frictionless connection across political borders and social divides, greater institutional transparency and the "freedom" of information.

Yet today, as Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and their ideological allies hail the Internet's power to spark revolutions and heal social ills, artists are using the Web to unsettle such optimistic accounts, responding to the supposed openness and accessibility of digital culture with a poetics of opacity and illegibility. Significantly, though perhaps unsurprisingly, language plays a central role in an increasing number of artworks being made with, on or about the Web. Alphanumeric code underlies the Internet; languages intelligible only to machines and specialists define our every online movement and encounter, even if end users primarily experience graphical interfaces laced with pictures. The simultaneous centrality and invisibility of code online is an animating tension and a thematic motif in work by Taryn Simon and Aaron Swartz, Kenneth Goldsmith, Jordan Wolfson and Ryan Trecartin. Their practices are emblematic of broader tendencies in contemporary art that stress the constraints online interfaces place on users while underscoring the Web's entanglement with government and corporate protocols.

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Screengrab from Aaron Swartz and Taryn Simon's Web project *Image Atlas*, 2012, showing the results of a search for Swartz's name.

RHIZOME'S ANNUAL Seven on Seven conference pairs seven technologists with seven visual artists. The New York-based art and technology organization prompts each duo to generate an online application or new media artwork within a single day. *Image Atlas*, a Web project created for the 2012 conference by artist Taryn Simon and the late programmer and Internet activist Aaron Swartz, exposes gaps in the lattice of online information as it tests Google's capacity to catalogue cultural expression around the world.

*Image Atlas* compiles image search results from scores of countries by accessing local engines, whether a national Google domain or a regionally popular service like South Korea's Naver.com. By aggregating these sites, *Image Atlas* offers the six most popular results organized by country in an attempt to expose the hidden space between cultures.

But this quasi-anthropological ambition to showcase cultural difference is belied by the clichéd images that turn up. Search for "love" on *Image Atlas* and the site produces images of doves, cartoon hearts, children, adult couples and large gatherings. At best, the results provide hazy insight into different conceptions of love, as the images alternately emphasize the feelings shared between two people (in the U.S. and most other places), within a group (Kenya) or for one's nation (North Korea). National boundaries are reflected in less subtle ways as well. Enter Swartz's name and a nearly identical set of images appears—save for blank rows representing Egypt, Libya, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Syria, where the name of the campaigner for online information freedom has been blocked.

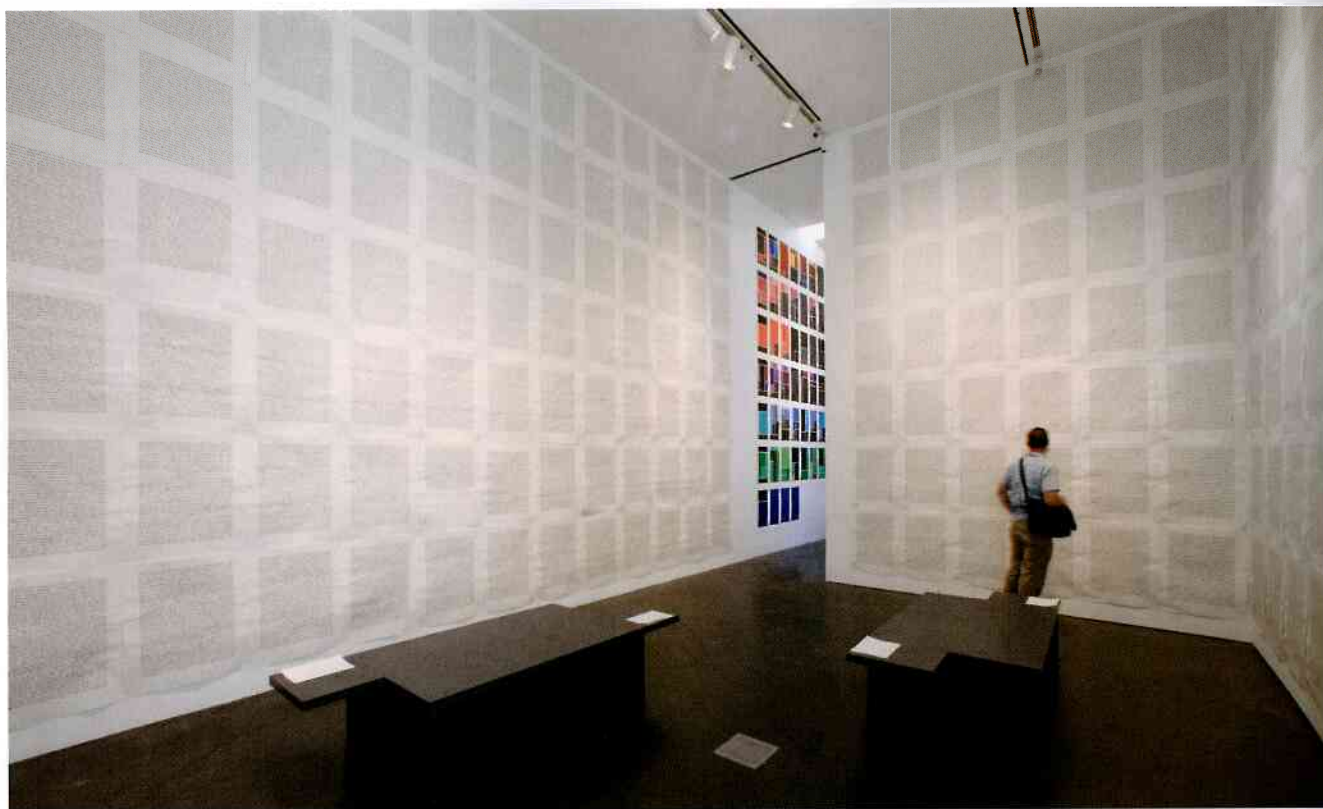
Google Image searches are, of course, subject to varying degrees of government control, but the most salient facet of *Image Atlas* may be its inextricable attachment to language, evinced through the layers of translation that occur with every search. Of course, any image search engine performs a transmutation of word into image. In addition, *Image Atlas* must first convert search terms into dozens of different languages, a process clumsily executed by Google Translate (in one notable instance of mistranslation, the search term "Jew" returns the actor *Jude Law* from German sites). But these perceptible acts of translation point to a more fundamental, if less visible, process that structures what we see. Google's top hits, generated with a proprietary algorithm, balance globally popular sources with results targeted to an individual user's browsing history. The exact search mechanism, optimized by Google through data mining, is as opaque as it is lucrative. Any cultural insights that *Image Atlas* might offer are therefore filtered first through the profit-driven logic of Google and its cohorts.

A scholar in the emerging field of software studies, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun identifies an irony central to this problem: "the computer—that most nonvisual and nontransparent device—has paradoxically fostered 'visual culture' and 'transparency.'"<sup>2</sup> In short, transparency is an ideology. Swartz recognized this and set out to demystify what he called the "programmed visions" of companies like Facebook and Google, which cater to advertisers by tracking our every activity in order to anticipate our desires. Speaking at Seven



Kenneth Goldsmith  
at his exhibition  
"Printing Out the  
Internet," 2013.  
Courtesy LABO  
Mexico City. Photo  
Marisol Rodríguez

View of the exhibition "Postscript: Writing After Conceptual Art," showing Goldsmith's installation *Soliloquy*, 1996, laser print on paper, dimensions variable; at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver. Photo Ron Pollard.



on *Seven*, he noted that these corporations “claim to present an almost unmediated view of the world, through statistics and algorithms and analyses, [but] in fact [they] are programmed and are programming us.”<sup>3</sup>

Swartz’s critique of transparency as a mere buzzword resonates with a recent emphasis in the arts on the “material” rather than semantic qualities of language—a rejection of expression in favor of attention to syntax, design, layout and code. Recent exhibitions like “Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language” (2012) at New York’s Museum of Modern Art and “Postscript: Writing After Conceptual Art” (2013) at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver featured works that treat “language as a material that can be manipulated . . . as something to be looked at rather than read . . . [and] as something to be arranged, built, or performed rather than written.”<sup>4</sup> Conceptual Writing, a tendency in avant-garde poetry that has percolated into the art world and was surveyed in “Postscript,” combines these concerns into an opaque aesthetic equally indebted to modernist experimentation and the characteristics of digital media.

The most visible proponent of Conceptual Writing, UbuWeb founder and MoMA’s first poet laureate Kenneth Goldsmith, has written several books he himself deems “unreadable.” Often thick tomes, these include a chronicle of every word he spoke over the period of a week (*Soliloquy*, 1996), a page-by-page reproduction of an entire issue of the *New York Times* (*Day*, 2003), and a transcription of radio broadcasters’ initial reactions to deaths of public significance, from JFK’s assassination to the September 11 attacks (*Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, 2013). Here is a passage from

*Day*, which intermingles news stories with ads in Goldsmith’s typically non-interventionist fashion:

As firefighters continued to spray arcs of water on the smoldering

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[gorewillsayanything.com](http://gorewillsayanything.com)

THE WHITE HOUSE

PAID FOR BY THE REPUBLICAN NATIONAL COMMITTEE

The ad combines television images of Mr. Gore with scornful dialogue and a not yet operational Web address.

BEWARE! IF YOU LIKE STORIES WITH HAPPY endings, avoid reading Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, now unfortunately NYT bestseller! [www.lemonysnicket.com](http://www.lemonysnicket.com)—ADVT.<sup>5</sup>

As durational projects in the tradition of Andy Warhol’s static films and John Cage’s chance compositions, Goldsmith’s works invite a renewed perception of quotidian phenomena, from overlooked conventions of publishing to informal patterns of speech. Rather than read his books, however, Goldsmith suggests that people should merely think about their structures, at most skimming the text—“imitating the way machines work,” as we do online, “by grazing dense texts for keywords.”<sup>6</sup> In *Uncreative Writing*, his theoretical tract and manifesto, Goldsmith contextualizes Conceptual Writing in relation to digital culture, invoking the presence of “texts



Ryan Trecartin:  
*Sibling Topics*  
(section a), 2009,  
video, approx. 51  
minutes. © Fitch  
Trecartin Studio.  
Courtesy Andrea  
Rosen Gallery,  
New York.

being written by machines to be read specifically by other machines.”<sup>7</sup> The implication is that Conceptual Writing functions as a poetic analogue to code; the poet’s task is no longer to express authentic feelings in lyric form, but to design systems for selecting and re-presenting existing language.

Introducing a 2003 UbuWeb anthology of Conceptual Writing—the first such sampler—poet and literary scholar Craig Dworkin presents the movement as an extension of numerous modernist practices: the disjunctive prose of Stein, Joyce and Beckett; the playful experiments of ‘pataphysics and Oulipo; and the self-referential inquiries of Conceptual art. Dworkin points out that “the ‘dematerialization’ of the art object” identified by critic Lucy Lippard “was accompanied by a re-materialization of language.” Along these lines, he quotes Robert Smithson’s conception of language “as printed matter—information which has a kind of physical presence.”<sup>8</sup> Dworkin connects this genealogy of Conceptual Writing to digital phenomena only years later, when introducing another anthology, *Against Expression*. He argues that “conceptual writing often operates as an interface—returning the answer to a particular query . . . or sorting and selecting from files of accumulated language pursuant to a certain algorithm.”<sup>9</sup> Certainly, Conceptual Writing could be described, metaphorically, as algorithmic writing: prose produced by the programmatic application of instructions to filter and organize readymade text. Yet unlike algorithms, writers are rarely concerned with efficiency, or bound by logic.

Goldsmith’s current project, “Printing Out the Internet,” embodies these contradictions. Earlier this year, the poet issued an open call to “print out as much of the Web as you want—be it

one sheet or a truckload,” then mail it to Mexico City’s LABOR gallery, where a massive pile of paper was displayed. The idea for the show, which Goldsmith dedicated to Aaron Swartz, occurred to the artist as he downloaded a cache of documents from the subscription-based academic database JSTOR, imagining its contents as printed material. (When he committed suicide earlier this year, Swartz faced draconian felony charges for downloading millions of JSTOR documents in an apparent attempt to open access to the archive.) Goldsmith conceived of the show as an illustration of the unimaginable vastness of information on the Internet. Writing to his Tumblr followers, he dubbed the Internet “the greatest poem ever written” and sized up his own project as “the ultimate crowd-sourced poem.”

IF GOLDSMITH GIVES RENEWED attention to the omnipresence of language online, he does not address the social ramifications of a divide between what we see and that which structures what we see. Rather than reproducing the logic of algorithmic sorting, young video artists Jordan Wolfson and Ryan Trecartin raise critical questions about how the Web is shaping identity at the individual and collective level. Both artists are best known for videos composed of rich visuals, weaving together CGI effects and live action footage. Yet it may be each artist’s use of language, steeped in the tropes and conventions of Web-based communication, that offers the most incisive perspective on digital culture.<sup>10</sup>

In Wolfson’s *Con Leche* (2009), animated Diet Coke bottles brimming over with milk stride through the empty streets and warehouses of Detroit. Peach-colored limbs

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underscore the seductive anthropomorphism already latent in the bottle's famous hourglass shape. With the uninflected but precise pronunciation of a computer, a female voice recites a litany of first-person statements about health, sexuality, mortality, identity and technology. The unseen cyborg narrator is continually interrupted by commands from Wolfson (also off-screen): "Can you *pause* please? Can you please *increase sex*?" Adjusting her voice accordingly each time, the narrator becomes breathier, or louder, as she complains about a cold shoulder, introduces herself as a 15-year-old boy unsure of his sexual identity or explains technological advancements in the smart phone.

The artist stitched together the entire monologue for this 22-minute video from various existing texts: a Google search reveals segments of the script in blogs, message boards, Wikipedia pages and news articles. The female voice in *Con Leche* does not convey a coherent, stable identity so much as "she" somehow embodies the distracted experience of online browsing: personal confessions, political rants, erotic narratives and corporate branding blur together. More than an "uncreative" rejection of a singular authorial voice in favor of appropriated texts, *Con Leche* offers something more subtle: the uncanny semblance of a personality cobbled together from disparate bits of language that have been stripped of their original context. While Wolfson selected and collaged the texts for his narrator to voice, the video also dramatizes another point of artistic intervention. Browbeating the virtual speaker, Wolfson dictates the *affect* of her delivery, inflecting the texts with tones that are often incommensurable with their literal meaning. Language is not just appropriated but transformed by delivery; grumpy threats become sexual overtures and vice versa.

IN TRECARTIN'S FRENETIC, clamorous videos, meaning is similarly located on the level of affect. In a typical work, the artist and his cast inhabit a world saturated with garish colors and fractured by digital editing effects. His characters, dressed in drag and often speaking in high-pitched rapid-fire volleys, shift personae (and genders) as if toggling between browser tabs. In *Sibling Topics* (section a), 2009, Ceader (Trecartin) is seen complaining to her boyfriend Baby (Lee Kyle) about her sisters—she has three, all played by Trecartin. The screen is split and Ceader's image doubles as she dances to a heavy beat that has suddenly kicked in. "Wha—oh my God, d'you see that?" she asks Baby. "One of my friends just prank-advertised on me again." Baby responds, "That's so funny. Your friends have no boundaries." The idiom should be taken literally. The permeable, boundless subjects of Trecartin's imagination—allegorical figures for the digital self—will go too far every time, like a viral Internet meme. Baby lacks even the most basic feature of an individual: a name. "I don't wanna participate in that kind of self-branding," he claims, only to meet with protests from Ceader: "How am I supposed to find you in the system?" A name is not only a brand; it is also a search term that can be algorithmically tracked.

Reflecting on the implications of editing one's own image, Trecartin has said, "Versions of yourself layered together might

actually be an emerging form of collaboration."<sup>11</sup> In a sense, this is a familiar phenomenon: in the digital age, our live bodies regularly interact with one or several of our own online profiles, coming together to construct something like a self. But Trecartin presents a radical, if increasingly prevalent, vision of where this may lead: "I hope it will someday be possible to truly liberate ourselves into a state where expression is existence and the accumulation of our situations become more of a catalogue of our identity rather than a written history. Maybe our personalities can be the location rather than our bodies."<sup>12</sup> Trecartin's work envisions this dispersal of the stable self into malleable identities that circulate between the real and virtual worlds.

Wolfson's and Trecartin's vivid fantasies and sensuous imagery represent a thoroughly different vision of digital culture than the one offered by Conceptual Writing, with its minimal, gray aesthetic. Dworkin's and Goldsmith's stance "against expression" sets up a dichotomy that effectively traps their project in procedural questions and mires it in a hunt for new ways to constrain writers to better mimic the work of machines. Yet Wolfson's and Trecartin's practices suggest that the methodologies of Conceptual Writing can be used flexibly, if not for the purpose of naive "expression," then to amplify and explore the affect that exists even after the self has been thoroughly demystified and the mechanisms of language have been deconstructed. In the worlds of *Con Leche* and *Sibling Topics*, the Web's opacity and profit-mindedness are already part of the linguistic fabric. The critique of the Internet that Swartz and other activists and theorists have articulated is not just a revelation that needs to be exhaustively restated in the form of unreadable tomes and impenetrable piles of paper. Instead, these insights can be a departure point for understanding the Web as both an incubator for new modes of linguistic expression and an archive of clichés, as an agent of profound cultural change and a mundane fixture of everyday life. ○

1. Allegedly first pronounced by Web inventor Tim Berners-Lee, this adage has appeared regularly in myriad variations in news articles and blogs for at least a decade. In 2005, poet Kenneth Goldsmith contended that this statement was no longer hyperbolic, but rather "the paradigmatic truism of our times," in an essay presented at the University of Pennsylvania. <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith>.
2. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "On Software, or the Persistence of Visual Knowledge," *Grey Room* 39, Winter 2005, p. 27.
3. A video recording of Swartz's Seven on Seven panel, Apr. 14, 2012, can be viewed at: [vimeo.com/40651117](http://vimeo.com/40651117).
4. From the introduction to the "Ecstatic Alphabets" online exhibition, accessible at: [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org).
5. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Day*, Great Barrington, Mass., The Figures, 2003, p. 15.
6. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 158.
7. Goldsmith produced text art and programmed in HTML during the early years of the World Wide Web, before he identified himself as a poet.
8. Craig Dworkin, "The UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing," 2003; [ubu.com/concept](http://ubu.com/concept).
9. Craig Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, co-edited with Kenneth Goldsmith, Chicago, Northwestern University Press, 2011, p. xlii.
10. Brian Droitcour suggests a similar point in "Making Word: Ryan Trecartin as Poet," [rhizome.org](http://rhizome.org), July 27, 2011.
11. Ryan Trecartin, Katie Kitamura and Hari Kunzru, "Ryan Trecartin: In Conversation," October 2011; [frieze.com](http://frieze.com).
12. Ryan Trecartin and Kristina Lee Podesva, "When the time comes, you won't understand the battlefield," *Filip* 13, Spring 2011, p. 104.