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PROMOTING THE SOCIAL OVER THE MEDIA THROUGH ART

This paper discusses *SjansMachine* a hybrid new media installation that matches participants based on their movie genre preferences. “Sjans” is Dutch slang for “flirt”, and also for “chance”. New media artists Carmin Karasic, Olga Mink, and Rolf van Gelder created this artwork in 2010. The piece is an intervention at the intersection of art and social media in the sense that it draws attention to interpersonal behaviors guided by social media software. Here, *SjansMachine* is discussed in the context of social networking. One focus is Facebook – Facebook’s friending function inspired the artwork. Another focus is online dating websites, because participants often engaged with *SjansMachine* in hopes of finding a date. Nevertheless, *SjansMachine*’s main purpose is to bring Facebook style friending into physical space, a process that I refer to as ‘speed friending’¹. The installation critiques subjective technologies that guide both virtual and physical social behaviors, by highlighting the inherent automatisms in the online phenomenon of dating and friending.

These considerations raise the following questions: Do Facebook and online dating sites modify social behavior? What happens when the virtual friend is brought into physical space? Does online dating influence interpersonal attraction? Does *SjansMachine* expose expectations about companion selection? These questions and their implications are addressed in the following text.

SjansMachine: The Artwork

*SjansMachine*² consists of a dynamic series of black and white portraits of participants, and a photo booth for taking each participant’s portrait. A hidden computer captures the portraits and sends them to a second computer that generates the *SjansMachine* animation, and projects the portraits via three seamlessly aligned projectors. The portraits are projected on two rows of 12 semi-translucent Plexiglas squares, creating a 6-meter by 1-meter wall, which is suspended from the ceiling. Each square briefly displays a portrait, while several times per second, portraits are randomly relocated on the squares. This

¹ ‘Speed friending’ is conceptually speed dating, the brief orchestrated one-on-one meeting of two strangers, combined with social media friending taking place in public physical space.

² Commissioned versions of the artwork were well received at Plaza Futura, in Eindhoven, and at the Dutch National Film Festival in Utrecht, The Netherlands in 2010, and at the Currents 2011 New Media Festival in Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA.

animated display creates the instantly engaging *SjansMachine* wall. Preferably the *SjansMachine* is installed in a well-frequented space such as a lounge or lobby area—at least 18 people ought to naturally linger in the area. Bars, cafés, and art openings are ideal settings because small crowds tend to mix and mingle with friends and strangers.

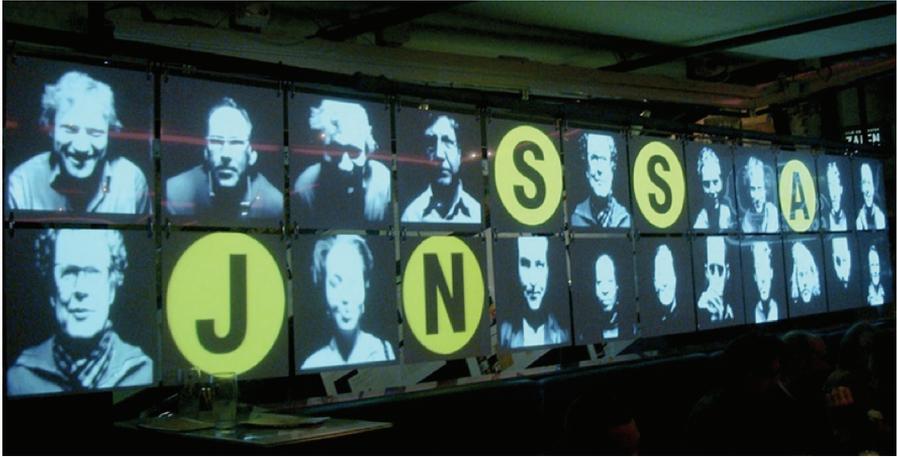


1 – Choosing Movie Genres in the Photo Booth, 2011

The wall of flashing portraits draws the potential participant to *SjansMachine*. She or he steps into the photo booth out of curiosity. Inside the booth, a computer screen and a webcam subtly installed above the screen are embedded in the photo booth wall. The participant sees himself or herself on the computer screen, and two hand-sized QR code³ cubes on a small shelf below the screen. Each cube surface has text and a QR code that identifies different personal preferences.

SjansMachine subjectively snaps the portraits, and participants do not have the option to tell *SjansMachine* when they are ready for the camera, or to delete their portrait. *SjansMachine*'s face detection software triggers the camera as soon as the participant faces the webcam, and the participant's portrait is immediately captured. The screen then prompts the participant to hold a cube in front of the screen to enter three preferences. After the third preference is entered, a robotic voice says, "Go see yourself on the *SjansMachine* wall." The participant exits the booth to find his or her portrait added to the projection.

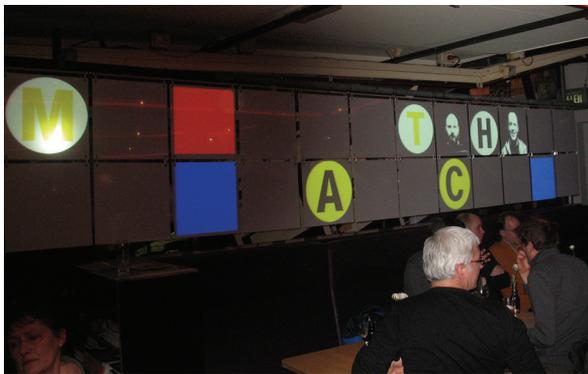
³ A QR code is a 2 dimensional barcode. It consists of a matrix of black squares against a white background. QR stands for Quick Response. Webcams and mobile phone cameras can quickly read QR codes. Like barcodes, QR codes are used to store digital information on physical objects.



2 – *SjansMachine*, 2010

The three preferences are used as matching criteria, which can be modified for site-specific installations. With each installation thus far, curators have opted for matching based on movie genres. For example, at the Dutch National Film Festival, people were matched based on their three favorite movie genres: ‘drama’, ‘action’, ‘thriller’, ‘comedy’, etc.

The ‘photo booth computer’ sends the *SjansMachine* participant information to the ‘animation projector computer’ using custom programs written by Rolf van Gelder in Processing. The computers share data via a router running local WiFi for the two *SjansMachine* computers. As each new portrait is added to the *SjansMachine* display wall, if the wall is full, the oldest portrait is replaced. The *SjansMachine* animation consists of portraits constantly, quickly shifting from square to random square.



3 – *SjansMachine* Wall in Match Mode, 2010

At random intervals of 15 to 20 minutes, the animation computer compares all the participants who are displayed on the wall and calculates the ‘best match’, based on their matching criteria preferences. *SjansMachine* then features the matched couple’s photos in a short animation displayed on the projection squares: the portraits quickly disappear one by one, until only the matched pair remains to ‘dance’ around the squares as a couple, accompanied by the flashing letters that spell “MATCH”, and a dynamic mix of red, blue, and green colored panels. Pairs of matched participants are each treated to a free drink to enjoy as they get to know each other.



4 – *SjansMachine* Match at the Dutch National Film Festival, 2010

SjansMachine algorithms ‘subjectively’ decide when to snap portraits, match participants, and publicly display these matched participants. By mixing face detection, QR codes, humor, and indeterminacy the artwork engages participants in a form of speed dating. The face detection technology clearly alludes to surveillance, but more importantly with respect to *SjansMachine*, it alludes to our digital presence, which often precedes our corporeal presence. The publicly displayed uncensored and uncontrolled portrait is an invasion of privacy that parallels the fact that anyone can google us before meeting us, and potentially ‘know us’ before we are introduced. It can be disconcerting to have a stranger ask about personal information only moments after an introduction. Yet, as people freely post such information on Facebook, dating sites, and many other places online, we often unwittingly permit others to scan our personal information. Manipulating the large QR code cubes emphasizes the intangibility of the data the cubes convey. QR codes are easily read by computers, but impossible for the participant to read. Using the cubes to enter preferences playfully highlights the generally accepted act of freely and permanently surrendering control of personal data for digital storage and manipulation. We rarely consider the value of our personal data, how our data will be used, or who owns, or who sees our data.

“Beyond every instrumental technology – what technologies do for us – there is a subjective technology – what technology does to us, as people, to our relationships, to our ways of looking at the world,” – *SherryTurkle, founder and director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self.*

Speed Friending

As mentioned above, *SjansMachine's* main purpose is to bring friending into physical space. We don't typically think of the meaning behind the term “friend”. As an automatism, we simply know what friend means. Friendship could be defined as a dyad in which each half is willing to drop what they are doing to help the other in a time of need. A friend could also simply be a confidant. These definitions however limit the user to a few close friends. A broader notion of friendship includes others the user personally knows, whom he or she cares about, and with whom he or she interacts. According to Dunbar's number⁴ humans can manage about 150 friends in this greater set. This total is in stark contrast to the large number of friends often seen in social network site member profiles, yet the number is consistent with the average number of friends on popular social media sites.⁵

Facebook was launched in 2004. As a direct result the concept of friendship expanded, and the term friend was redefined. Suddenly words such as “friend” and “like” became social media jargon. “Like” became an online feedback button, and “friend” became a verb. Facebook behavior patterns evolved into a new verb and the following six new definitions of friend were identified by Vanessa Van Petten⁶:

- “Real Friends”: friends with whom you are in contact beyond Facebook.
- “Friends of Friends”: friends your friends have friended.
- “People You Want to Know”: friends to whom you sent friend requests.
- “Old Friends”: friends from your past with whom you (usually only briefly) reconnect.
- “Fake Friends”: friends whose friend requests you accepted without knowing who they are.

⁴ A. Wilkins (2011, May 31), “Dunbar's Number Proves that You Can't Realistically Follow More than 150 Friends on Twitter”, retrieved February 20, 2012, from *io9*: <http://io9.com/5807157/dunbars-number-proves-that-you-cant-realistically-follow-more-than-150-friends-on-twitter>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ V. Van Petten (2008, July 22), “Serial Friending: How Facebook is Changing the Definition of Friendship”, retrieved November 10, 2010, from *Radical Parenting*: <http://www.radicalparenting.com/2008/07/22/serial-friending-how-facebook-is-changing-the-definition-of-friendship/>.

- “Serial Friends, or Mr. So and So from the place with the thing that time ...”: friends listed among the rest of your friends, even though you have no idea who they are or why you friended them.

Social network friending is huge. With 845 million monthly active members at the start of 2012⁷, Facebook is the single largest online community. If Facebook were a nation, only India and China would have a greater population. With so many citizens, and so many kinds of friends, no wonder users eventually succumb to serial friending, which leads to many Facebook profiles reporting totals of hundreds, even up to 5000 plus friends. Although such behavior tends to trivialize friendship, serial friending perpetuates itself, because somehow the offer of friendship is still perceived as some sort of honor. The expanded “friend” and “unfriend” currency is so socially significant that it justified the New Oxford American Dictionary’s choice of “unfriend” as the 2009 “Word of the Year”⁸.

Facebook’s popularity has modified interpersonal behavior in more ways than just friending. The sheer volume of users adopting social media habits already has societal impact. Facebook is now the most popular digital communication tool. It is more popular than texting and email.⁹ This is due to the fact that Facebook makes it so easy to connect and keep up with family and friends by encouraging, among other things, media and photo sharing. This cuts the need for small talk when Facebook users meet face-to-face, and facilitates deep conversations between long distance friends who may never meet. It urges users to reconnect with old acquaintances, and suggests friends of friends to increase social networks. Facebook also promotes professional networking and playing multiplayer games.

Survival in a state of information overload and hyper stimulation requires a filtered worldview based on limited data. Consequently, interaction with customizable digital conveniences becomes intuitive *and even expected*. For example, a user intuitively knows that the result of a name search in Facebook will list the names of the user’s Facebook friends first, followed by other search results related to the searched name. As a convenience, Facebook software customizes the search results for the user, because an alphabetical listing of every Facebook user with the searched name would probably be of little value. Users have come to expect subjective technologies to filter information based on the user’s data and behavior patterns. Hence individuality and uniqueness are replaced by a digitized, infinitely self-referential, public sphere

⁷ Facebook Press Team (2012, January 24), *Facebook Newsroom – Statistics*, retrieved February 16, 2012, from *Facebook*: <http://newsroom.fb.com/Fact-Sheet/Statistics-8b.aspx>.

⁸ B. Goldsmith (2009, November 17), “‘Unfriend’ Named Word of 2009”, ed. by M. Fahmy, retrieved November 10, 2010, from *Reuters*: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/11/17/words-unfriend-idUSTRE5AG09H20091117>.

⁹ FE Bureau (2010, January 12), “The ‘Friending’ Phenomenon”, retrieved November 10, 2010, from *The Financial Express*: <http://www.financialexpress.com/news/the-friending-phenomenon/566269>.

that approximates everything yet represents no specific thing. An aspect of this individuality shift is the now universal “Like” button. It is a digital signifier that encourages the user to be the first of their friends to “Like” whatever the object signifies, or join their friends who already “Like” whatever the object signifies.

Google, Facebook, and various social media use subjective software to decide and prioritize what is important to the user. Since this filtering convenience is based on “confirmed” friends, the user’s worldview is narrowed to their friends’ views, which happens to supply much of the user’s news. Social media even calls it “News Feed”! Oddly, these filters are largely accepted without questioning the consequences. The opportunity for debate and re-evaluation of values is reduced, because most people tend to agree with their friends’ opinions. Another downside is that adapting to the conveniences can become habits that grow into addictions.

Most users desire contact with others, and social media connectivity offers some relief for social isolation. Could such factors play into addictive behaviors, and/or account for users ignoring issues of privacy and sharing too much information? Users are bolder and likely to share more personal information when communicating through typing. Youth are especially reckless with respect to privacy and consideration for consequences of social network conduct. Digital natives don’t seem to care that whatever they put online stays online, and that posting personal information may be unwise or dangerous.

Whether the cause is addiction, the “online high” or something else, the result is that more time is spent connecting with others online, which often means less time face-to-face with others. In fact, the variety offered by online socializing options is tough competition for mere individual face-to-face contact. It follows that a Facebook user’s socializing time is spent more efficiently while socializing with virtual friends, because the user can interact with several virtual friends simultaneously via social media tools, thus maximizing socializing time. However the user’s virtual friends only know the user’s digital persona that has been constructed for socializing in the virtual realm. The virtual friends do not know the user in the flesh. Likewise, this user only knows the digital personae of their virtual friends, not the other physical Facebook users behind these virtual friends. If they met face-to-face, the Facebook user and their Facebook friend would interact with each other bodily, not virtually. The friendship would become tangible, because both Facebook users must deal with the physical versions of their virtual friends, rather than a digital signifier that they can “turn on and off” at will.

SjansMachine directly contrasts Facebook virtual friends, because users must deal with the physical versions of their computer made friends. Speed friending starts when *SjansMachine* publicly announces that the participant and their match are to meet right now, face-to-face. The participant senses a social obligation to meet their match, probably a stranger, who *SjansMachine* has selected for her or him. The participant can either hide or face their new

computer-selected friend. This public meeting could be viewed as a “good thing” or a “bad thing”, based on the mutual reaction of the digital pair once they are transformed into a physical couple. *SjansMachine* is typically installed in a lounge area, so that matched couples are treated to a drink, which increases the possibility of this being a “good thing”. Others present in the space usually recognize and eagerly encourage a “*SjansMachine* match” couple to find each other. Usually matched couples simply enjoy chatting over their free drink, and then return to the *SjansMachine* photo booth just for fun. Of course sometimes one part of the match pair quickly hides or leaves to avoid meeting her or his match. Or conversely, occasionally the matched couple enjoys their chat so much that they continue chatting for the rest of the evening.

SjansMachine as Flirt Machine

The core concept of this artwork is rooted in a conversation about data exchange that was inspired by an RFID workshop. RFID data exchange requires digital pairing, which by way of artistic liberty can be personified as digital matchmaking. This notion reminded us of how people friend each other in Facebook, but never meet face-to-face. We thought we could use RFID matching to bring random friending into real space, paralleling the Facebook feature that suggests friends. Ultimately we decided RFID technology was too cumbersome and too limiting, so we considered alternatives such as biorhythms, the Zodiac, Chinese and/or Indian horoscopes as the basis for match criteria. These match ideas were not limited to gender preferences, because the matches were intended to challenge the virtual aspect of Facebook friends, which are not based on gender, by asking “What happens when Facebook friends are ‘generated’ real-time in real space?”

As artists, we specifically decided a random match would be far more interesting than a match based on gender preferences, yet consistently the first question asked when we introduced *SjansMachine* was, “Does it match on gender?” Although it was not our intention, for most participants *SjansMachine* matching usually connotes romantic matchmaking. This surprised us, since Facebook friending inspired the artwork, and motivations for Facebook friending are not limited to seeking romantic partners. We expected people to participate for the chance to win a free drink and make new friends, not merely as a short cut to potential romantic possibilities.

“*SjansMachine* is better than online dating, because it’s free, and I can see the ladies, not just their photos!” beamed a young man. His comment summarizes many participants’ motivation for engaging with *SjansMachine*. Entering movie genre preferences to find a potential partner, is nothing compared to the

amount of data users *pay for the privilege* to enter on dating websites. Yet dating websites are now more popular than pornography websites.¹⁰ Any previous stigma associated with dating sites has faded fast. By 2005, over 40 % of singles in England between 25 and 50 had tried an online dating service.¹¹

Although physical attraction remains important, online dating redefines attraction due to the multitude of different ways in which users can search for specific characteristics. Formerly important instinctive factors such as reciprocal liking, familiarity and body language are readily replaced by profile data inspection. Users are willing to invest time and sometimes money into finding a “soul mate”. Detailed profiles provide answers to hundreds of questions and include several photos. Profiles are queried and analyzed to create a personalized database of potential partner choices.

Media consumption, production, and interaction have expanded through web technologies. Evolving digital environments offer novel alternatives for establishing tailor made relationships. Social media also encourage the user to develop a personal brand. A personal brand is necessary because the user’s digital persona must maintain some level of interpersonal congruency. In today’s highly mediated environment, pervasive technologies have given digital doubles lives of their own, and goals are often based on hyper realities. Representation has become more important than personal opinion, or observation. As a result, misrepresentation is common on dating sites and social media.

Contrarily *SjansMachine* doesn’t allow its participants to present their ‘best’ self to the public. Step into the photo booth and ready or not, the computer captures the participant. Once it snaps their photo, they can’t delete or change it. The participant is instantly portrayed on the *SjansMachine* wall, making assumed privacy suddenly public. This deautomatized moment presents an instance of voyeurism, revealing an aspect of *SjansMachine* that is more confrontational than social media.

Conclusion

Like social media, *SjansMachine* presents data driven friend suggestions. *SjansMachine*’s subjective logic for capturing portraits and matching participants highlights ways in which technologies guide our behavior. Facebook redefined “friend” and filters our information resources while increasing the ease with which we connect with family and friends. But unlike *SjansMachine* virtual friends who are invited to meet face-to-face, most Facebook virtual

¹⁰ R. L. Mitchell (2009, February 13), “Online Dating: It’s Bigger than Porn. (Computerworld Inc.)”, retrieved November 11, 2010, from *Computerworld Blogs*: http://blogs.computerworld.com/online_dating_its_bigger_than_porn.

¹¹ S. Harris (2005, December 11), “The Phenomenon of Online Dating – The Whole Truth!”, retrieved November 11, 2010, from *Article Alley*: <http://sarahharris.articlealley.com/the-phenomenon-of-online-dating--the-whole-truth-19183.html>.

friends will never meet in person. Dating sites are time consuming and can be costly, and they are transforming mate selection into data scanning. *SjansMachine*, in contrast, allows you to scan potential partners – and “friends” – in person and for free.

SjansMachine calls attention to the amount of time we spend socializing and seeking others via social media in real-time and asynchronously. We typically engage in these activities alone, often at home, and usually in private. Rather than opting to chat with multiple Facebook friends at once, *SjansMachine* matches encourage participants to focus on just one person for a few minutes. Further, unlike chats in Facebook or dating sites, one cannot instantly “turn off the chat” without any explanation, because *SjansMachine* operates in a public space with real people.

By confronting participants with facing a computer generated “friend” in real space, *SjansMachine* touches on an anxiety many people feel about approaching a virtual Facebook friend; someone we have never met face-to-face. This anxiety may prevent virtual Facebook friends from initiating a chat offline, or even in Facebook, i.e. you may be “virtual friends” with a famous person, but that’s not enough to freely strike up a chat when you see them online or in person. Perhaps anxiety over rejection, or having to explain who we are, or merely the assumption that their time is more valuable than ours, limits one’s boldness. *SjansMachine* reduces or eliminates this anxiety, and breaks the ice by publicly displaying the virtual friends as a couple, as well as providing shared preferences for conversation as they share a drink.

No matter how (un-)attractive and theoretically and technically (im-)perfect the digital representation; photos, posts, and data are always merely signifiers. *SjansMachine* brings participants together in a mutual physical location, who might not meet each other otherwise. The artwork lowers the barrier for approaching a stranger, and the match preferences serve as a catalyst for conversation. Participating in an art installation may also contribute to a diminished sense of shame or inhibition. The free drinks are an incentive to participate because participants have a chance to win, and little to lose. Unlike the confirmed friends in social media or the calculated matches of dating sites, *SjansMachine* adds a layer of randomness. It is free and fast, and participants might even meet their soul mate too. *SjansMachine* reminds participants that even in these highly digitized times, social media friending and online dating are not the only options for social interaction.

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