

LIFE-LOG-ART

Lenara Verle

In an overly connected and digitized world, privacy becomes a privilege, and many people renounce to this privilege in a voluntary and purposeful way. By design or by accident, the private life becomes a work of performance art. What can we do, and can be done to us, with this growing digital memory? Some of these questions are raised by the works of a range of contemporary artists exploring the theme of lifelogging.



The 2010 Feltron Annual Report, by Nicholas Felton.

Recording information about one's life is not a new activity. Journals, correspondence, pictures and other forms of registering our life events have existed for quite a while and have enjoyed great popularity. As the time passes, new technologies for gathering and registering data are created, and the amount of information being logged seems to grow almost exponentially, some of it being purposefully recorded by ourselves, and some of it being logged in an almost automatic way by devices surrounding us.

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The records we create of our life have the role of a memory outside the self, an external storage beyond the one in our brains. While the features of our biological memory system were long determined by evolution, we are now defining the features of this new digital, additional memory. How much to record

and from what sources? How to extract meaning from the data, how to filter the memories? How to create meaning with the data, to connect and reach out? Who to grant access to, and share our memories with?

The artist and designer Nicholas Felton creates beautiful graphics from personal data. In 2010 he designed a special printed report after his father's death. According to him it represented "an encapsulation of my father's life, as communicated by the calendars, slides and other artifacts in my possession." [1] All of them analog records, from calendar entries to toll receipts, they already displayed a tendency to grow more abundant each decade. Felton diligently sorted through all of them and rendered the information he deemed interesting into well-designed pie charts, line graphics and tables of numbers, adorned by selected images. He has been creating a yearly report about his own life since 2005, following many of the data trails his computer and devices create about himself, and in 2009 he started handing out requests to every person with whom he had a meaningful encounter to submit a record of their meeting through an online survey. [2] He also created a software called Daytum to help others log and graph similar data. It is one of the many tools available to try to extract meaning from digital memories.

The website quantifiedself.com was also created for people who are logging many different aspects of their lives. One of its founders, Gary Wolf, talks about the motivation behind loggers: "For many self-trackers, the goal is unknown. Although they may take up tracking with a specific question in mind, they continue because they believe their numbers hold secrets that they can't afford to ignore, including answers to questions they have not yet thought to ask." [3]

If many people are purposefully tracking and registering their daily lives, and choosing how to display and share this information, some are surprised when they discover they are leaving trails in the digital world, and worried about who has access to this data. The digital tools make many tasks easier and faster, but often come with the cost of reduced privacy.

Hasan Elahi is a bangladeshi-born artist that has been documenting his life openly since 2002, when the FBI mistook him for a terrorist. He posts pictures of every meal he has, every purchase he makes, all the travels he takes, his current location, and many other types of information on his website trackingtransience.net. His life has become a sort of performance art, and thousands of people, including FBI agents, access his site. According to an interview he gave in 2007, he hopes they eventually lose interest, and "he figures the day is coming when so many people shove so much personal data online that it will put Big Brother out of business." [4]

The Big Brother nowadays is not only found working for the government but also inside corporations making their business collecting and selling our personal data. Google's mission to "don't be evil" is also a recognition that if only they wanted, they could be. Most of our personal information including emails, pictures and all sorts of tidbits is increasingly online at services provided by corporations, Google and Microsoft currently being two of the biggest ones.

In a culture growing accustomed to the benefits of abundant, convenient and fast digital tools, many agree with Elahi and are not afraid of opening up their lives to the world. Some are aiming to extract and create meaning from digital memories, to find beauty in mundane moments. New forms of art expression are being experimented with. A couple in Seattle attached a camera to their cat Cooper and posted a selection of pictures online, which attracted many admirers and are now for sale. According to Cooper's owner, the photographs taken automatically by the cat's camera surprised him: "It's interesting

that something completely arbitrary can have such a beautiful result. It really changed my view on what art is, how it can be conceived and how it's interpreted." [5]

Life as art is not a concept exclusive to the digital technologies, the novelty they bring being maybe the opportunity and tools for more people to become life-loggers, and to generate forms of life-log-art. According to Gary Wolf, four things were fundamental in this process: "First, electronic sensors got smaller and better. Second, people started carrying powerful computing devices, typically disguised as mobile phones. Third, social media made it seem normal to share everything. And fourth, we began to get an inkling of the rise of a global superintelligence known as the cloud." [3]

Among the challenges the digital format poses for art, one is the conservation of a medium so dependent on constantly evolving hardware and software that, at the same time it opens new possibilities for experimentation, is rendering old pieces fast obsolete. Gordon Bell, a key-figure in computing and a prolific lifelogger who succeeded in digitizing most of his life, worries about it: "Another technical challenge will be ensuring that users are able to open their digital files decades after storing them. We have already run into cases where we could not access documents because their formats were obsolete. Digital archivists will have to constantly convert their files to the latest formats." [6] Bell's colleague Jim Gemmel is also a lifelogger and sees his extended digital memory as part of himself: "one day, Gemmell's hard drive crashed, and he hadn't backed up in four months. When he got his MyLifeBits back up and running, the hole that had been punched in his memories was palpable, even painful. [...] He was amazed to realize his backup brain was no longer some novelty but a regular part of his psychological landscape." [7]

We are faced with the question of what shall we record, and the answer seems increasingly to be "everything". Even though most of it will get filtered out, mashed up together and consolidated into new forms, simply forgotten, or maybe fallen victim of obsolescence, purposefully or accidentally. It's all part of our new challenging digitized lives.

References and Notes:

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