24 Hours of Vine: Big Data and Social Performance

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Abstract—24h Social is a generative a data-driven generative video installation that explores the social media phenomenon of Vine video as performances in data. The project is created from a database of appropriated Vine content, extracted from millions of tweets, with each video shown at the time of its original creation. The project simultaneously celebrates Vine as a platform that facilitates succinct creative performative expressions whilst acknowledging that these activities are embedded within a problematic data assemblage that accrues substantial quantities of data on its users. Drawing on notions of social media performance it is suggested that a pathway to understanding the complex interplay of platform affordances and user performance in Vine is through a treatment of Vines as performances in data. The Vine database is identified as a resource for revealing new insights into everyday life at multiple levels and not solely a corporate or governmental intelligence asset used to serve targeted advertising or profile populations. This paper proposes that activist art practice has a part to play in making visible the structures and practices of data capture thus opening them to scrutiny using 24h Social as a case study.

Keywords—Vine, social media, data-assemblages, video art,

I. INTRODUCTION

24h Social is a generative video installation that explores the social media phenomenon of Vine video as performances in data. A day of Vine videos are appropriated, without permission, from the platform and algorithmically re-framed as a rendition of a full day on social media, according to Vine. The project displays 3-6 videos simultaneously, synced to the time of their creation, for each 6 second Vine-sized, block of the day with videos accumulating over the 24 hour screening time of the work to form a complex multilayered rendition of a full day on Vine. While on the surface 24h Social is a video artwork – displaying 86,000 videos in a 24 hour period – at a more profound level it is a data artwork that seeks to explore the centrality of data, its capture, storage and analysis in a digitally mediated everyday. Mark Weiser, the father of ubiquitous computing, maintained that the most profound technologies are those that recede from view [1] only coming to our attention when they fail. In a sense regimes of data collection have become Weiser's quiet computing as they recede from view without ever being sufficiently in view for the targets of their scrutiny to notice either failure or substantial escalation. This paper will propose that activist art practice has a part to play in making visible the structures and practices of data capture thus opening them to scrutiny. This will be approached through a case study of the video sharing platform Vine and this author's data art project 24h Social that intervened to capture a day of Vine videos [2]. The project simultaneously celebrates Vine as a platform that facilitates succinct creative expressions whilst acknowledging that these activities are embedded within a data assemblage [3] that accrues substantial quantities of data on its users. As the Internet adage goes “When something online is free, you’re not the customer, you’re the product” [4].

Both access and oversight are important if the privacy issues of data collection, analysis and use are to be understood and debated beyond the realm of specialists and if new insights are to be gained from opening these data resources beyond corporate and governmental use. It is proposed that artistic practices that emerge in response to escalating regimes of data collection work to highlight and make legible the opaque processes involved and go toward establishing new methodologies that open data up as an artistic resource that can lead to new insights and approaches to understanding everyday life through its data trail. Whether artistic and activist approaches toward data liberation and analysis can retain access for a wider public remains to be seen but certainly it would seem that the more debate is engendered around issues of data privacy and access this will go toward preventing these related issues fading into the background.

II. THE VINE PLATFORM

Vine is a mobile first video sharing service built around a mobile app designed to create 6 second looping videos and post them online. The service launched in January 2013 – which was acquired by Twitter the day before its launch – explicitly set out to hold a mirror to the everyday, describing Vines as “little windows into the people, settings, ideas and objects that make up your life”. [5]
This ambition, to create a tool for users to self-document their lives as 6 second video vignettes, mirrors the questions that other social networks use to frame the status update. While Vine's brevity brings a new approach to self documentation this is not a new idea. Wearable computing pioneer Steve Mann [6] has been documenting his life with a face mounted camera since 1994, vlogging (or video blogging) began in the early 2000s growing in popularity with the advent in Youtube in 2005, and miniaturized life logging cameras such as the Autographer and Narrative Clip have become mainstream products associated with the quantified self movement. Vine's innovation is to frame the status update as a situational performative looping video presenting everyday life as a series of situations. This concentration on framing status within tightly constrained parameters has challenged users to create engaging vignettes that are self-consciously creative responses to the medium. These range from sophisticated scripted scenarios that play out in 6 seconds, to pranks and memes, formal exercises in looping video or simple renditions of everyday situations. Everything is present on Vine but some things are more present than others. Viners “do it for the Vine”\(^1\), twerk, sing, do comedy, smack each other (#smackcam), have sex, dance, smoke marijuana, set themselves on fire, check their phones, go to school and work, play games, use computers, drive and drink alcohol\(^2\), see figure 1.

From the start Vine was mobile first. The only way to create a vine is through the mobile app and initially the only editing tool was a start-stop record button, establishing stop-motion movements and animation at the core of Vine's distinctive style. The affordances of the Vine app, principally its time limit, loops, mobile focus and close integration with Twitter, shaped the emergence of Vine video conventions. Vine has resisted the temptation to make it feature rich keeping additions to a minimum. In March 2013 the ability to embed Vines on webpages was introduced enabling Vines to be included on other services, such as Tumblr, significantly expanding access to the service and its videos. In April 2013 trending hashtags were added, allowing users to follow popular Vine memes such as #smackcam and of course #twerking, an activity tailor-made for Vine's brevity. The ability to switch between front and back cameras mid-video catering for all selfie occasions was also part of this upgrade. It wasn't until October 2013 that a basic form of editing, which broke vines into six parts that could be re-arranged, was added. In terms of content curation, the principle innovations were in July 2013 with the addition of 15 content channels and 1 January 2014 when, in a move that ran counter to the mobile ephemerality of vine, a website was created featuring user profiles pages and expanding access to the service and its videos. In April 2013 trending hashtags were added, allowing users to follow popular Vine memes such as #smackcam and of course #twerking, an activity tailor-made for Vine's brevity. The ability to switch between front and back cameras mid-video catering for all selfie occasions was also part of this upgrade. It wasn't until October 2013 that a basic form of editing, which broke vines into six parts that could be re-arranged, was added. In terms of content curation, the principle innovations were in July 2013 with the addition of 15 content channels and January 2014 when, in a move that ran counter to the mobile ephemeral of vine, a website was created featuring user profiles pages and featured content, selected by editors but infrequently updated, was added. Profile pages allowed viewing all a user's videos together, a feature hitherto unavailable, assisting in promoting individual users with strong personal brands with this aspect growing in prominence with the emergence of homegrown Vine stars.

This paper proposes a consideration of Vine as a performative space, with the performances created adhering closely to – but not determined by – the intentions of the platform’s creators. Vine's stated intent is for Vines to reflect the situations of their creators everyday lives with this intent engineered or “scripted” into the platform, that is the platform and workflow required to make and post a video designed to facilitate a range of actions whilst constraining others. Vines could only be shot on the mobile app\(^3\), editing is limited to six edits and with every video looping continually in a gif-like manner. The affordances \(^7\) of any system wield significant influence but generally do not determine the stable usage pattern of the platform, despite the best efforts of its creators. While studies have identified many sources of constraint and control, engineered directly into technologies, configuring \(^8\) or scripting \(^9\) the user, alternative interaction mechanisms such as de-scripting that allow users to resist and counter these influences have been identified. One area of interest is in the degree to which user practices and the emergent performance conventions of the platform can overcome these factors and become more influential in shaping Vines user practices.

Ultimately the product in Vine is not the videos or even the mobile application but is, if we are to follow the internet adage, the user. This brings us to the paper's second proposal, that performances in Vine are performances in data and that any understanding of Vine as a platform needs to begin with the data. This proposal was at the heart of 24h Social as it sought to comprehend the nature of a day on Vine through capturing every second of that 24 hour period in a database.

IV. PERFORMANCES IN DATA

To establish Vines as performances in data we first need to examine notions of performance within a social media context. Vine is a platform that affords and suggests a condensed performance to camera, with each performance occurring within the constraints of the platform. This entails a performance of no longer than six seconds, recorded with a mobile device and containing no more than six edits, this performance is then shared with the Vine community by posting to the platform and Twitter with a descriptive text and applying hashtags to locate it within relevant community memes. For example all smack cam videos are tagging #smackcam. Recent studies on the performativity of social media have focused on Twitter, a sister platform of Vine. Employing the dramaturgical model of Erving Goffman \[^{10}\] with its focus on self presentation in social situations. The complex process of constructing identities through performance becomes ever-more complex in networked social media like Twitter and Vine by “saturating the self with ever-expanding networks of people, relations and performance stages” \(^{[11]}\).
However this model of performativity presupposes presence, knowledge of the audience and a distinction between public and private allowing for tempering and adjusting a performance in response to audience cues. Performance in social media lacks knowledge of the audience and a clear demarcation between private and public space in what danah boyd calls “context collapse” [12] with performers addressing networked publics of both known and imagined audiences. Studies of Twitter are useful only to a point in considering Vine. Vine performances are at one level easily recognizable as performance (musical and comedy for example), while there may be a temptation is to consider all Vines in this form the majority do not fit this model. Surface similarities mask a complex interplay of platform affordances with identity performance, and emergent community conventions alongside traditional notions of performance resulting in performances that are hybrid in nature and dependent on the circumstance of their creation and the affordances and conventions of the platform. Social media researcher Bernie Hogan suggests that social media performances need to be separated into performances as ephemeral act and performances as recorded act. Goffman's theories presuppose presence, which grants the performer the ability to take cues from the audience and adjust the performance accordingly. This assumes a synchronous performance whereas social media performance is typically asynchronous. Vine's recorded performances are no longer tied to the ephemeral situation of the performance, can be viewed without contextual knowledge and are subject to new unknown contexts. His exhibition approach differentiates between synchronous performances and asynchronous “exhibitions” of the artifacts (or data) of performance [13]. Applying Hogan's approach to Vine has users producing reproducible artifacts (of performance) that are hybrid in nature and dependent on the circumstance of their creation and the affordances and conventions of the platform. Social media researcher Bernie Hogan suggests that social media performances need to be separated into performances as ephemeral act and performances as recorded act. Goffman's theories presuppose presence, which grants the performer the ability to take cues from the audience and adjust the performance accordingly. This assumes a synchronous performance whereas social media performance is typically asynchronous. Vine's recorded performances are no longer tied to the ephemeral situation of the performance, can be viewed without contextual knowledge and are subject to new unknown contexts. His exhibition approach differentiates between synchronous performances and asynchronous “exhibitions” of the artifacts (or data) of performance [13]. Applying Hogan's approach to Vine has users producing reproducible artifacts (of performance) that are stored, available for curation and brought forward for exhibition through a variety of methods. This allows a reading of Vine video artifacts as data held in storehouses (databases) to be algorithmically curated by Vine, but also by Vine aggregation sites, by interventionist works such as this author's 24h Social, and other algorithmic processes such as a search, content scraping and so forth. These bring artifacts out of storage for targeted exhibitions reflecting the logic of the curation process – for example in 24h Social this was to represent every second of a 24 hour period with at least one Vine video created at that exact time.

V. VINE AS DATA

In considering Vines as data artifacts of performance we must then locate these data artifacts within what Rob Kitchin terms the greater data assemblage of the platform [3], itself interconnected with other platforms and a node within a greater data assemblage of, for example the mobile device and its infrastructural requirements and Android or IOS operating systems themselves deeply embedded within the Google and Apple networks. The 2013 Snowden revelations on the extent of the NSA's data collection regime have made it clear that the principle Internet corporations operate as nodes within this extensive quasi-legal global network of surveillance and that, despite protestations to the contrary, all data are routinely shared with governments rendering discussions about data privacy moot. [14]

The Vine platform is itself a data assemblage, that is a complex socio-technical assemblage “composed of many apparatuses and elements that are thoroughly entwined, and develop and mutate over time and space” [3] of which Vine video data artifacts are one element. Data assemblages “frame what and how data are produced and to what ends they are employed” and are structured and managed to produce this data [3]. Lisa Getelman contends that raw data is an oxymoron that “data need to be imagined as data in order to exist and function as such” [13] rendering the structuring of the data collection methodology constitutive of the data produced. In order to understand Vine as a performative platform, whose product is data, we need insight into this database. Vine's database isn't merely a neutral technical method of storing data captured on the functioning of the platform, rather it is a “bundle of contingent and relational processes that do work in the world” [3]. What is the work that this platform is structured to do is and can the role of Vine's performers ever be more than wetware components of the data assemblage?

Each Vine is thus a data artifact itself that is embedded in metadata from social media sharing and from its production on the Vine app, version 2.1.2 for Android includes among the permissions required to install the ability to find other accounts on the device, to read contacts, to access device ID and call information and photographs and video, see figure 1. In addition to the broad sweep of accessing contact information, call metadata and other accounts on your device, the most far reaching element is the unique device ID which allows potential access to device location information and on installed apps, which can in turn be correlated with data obtained from other social media accounts to build a rich profile of the Vine user with this data bundle becoming in a real sense Vine's product. With this data packaged for sale through data brokers such as Gnip (gnip.com) which Twitter acquired in April 2013.4

Figure 2: Permissions for version 2.2.1 of the Vine app on Android.
VI. 24h Social

24h Social is an artwork that approaches Vine as a social media service where the creative expressions of its users are performances in data. It seeks to critique and unravel the entanglements of a platform that affords opportunities for genuine creative and innovative expressions which are commodified as a data-product. It does this through knowingly capturing a day of Vine data and re-commodifying it as an artwork thus emulating Vine's process of commodification and appropriation re-contextualized the data as the artwork. Through this intervention in the Vine database 24h Social can be thought of (after Hogan) curate Vine's content according to a curatorial algorithm. The re-contextualization proposed in Hogan's exhibitions are accentuated through an algorithmic process that removes all metadata, removing user names, accompanying commentary, hashtags, locations reframing them through temporality – every second of a day of Vine.

This is an interventionist project that sought to access and appropriate Vine's data. In the lack of an official API vines were accessed via Twitter using custom code that extracted all tweets containing the url 'vine.co/v/' indicating links to Vine videos. The resulting database of millions of tweets was processed and the metadata parsed and analyzed. Video files were automatically downloaded and saved from their Amazon Web Services (AWS) servers and stored in a database that categorized them temporally based on the time of their original posting to Vine, with at least one video for every second of the day, see figure 3.

This resulting in database of over 100,000 videos, which was more than 100GB in size, resulting in a database representing each of the 86,400 seconds of the day on Vine. The project operates as a durational large-scale video projection that lasts for 24 hours. Over its duration videos are algorithmically selected from the database and played at the time of their creation with 3-6 videos playing simultaneously for each six second vine-sized block of the day with 86,400 videos played over 24 hours.

VII. Future Work

24h Social as an interventionist work appropriated the data of Vine, without permission, to use as raw material. At one level this was a celebration of the creativity evident in the platform, a creativity reminiscent of the early world wide web, re-framing tens of thousands of individual videos to visualize a day according to Vine, relentless, anarchic, humorous and ultimately uplifting. At another level it sought to make visible the centrality of data in our digital everyday, highlighting that even platforms that privilege ephemerality are nonetheless rooted in data, nothing is ephemeral everything is stored analyzed and commodified. Finally the project demonstrates that the data captured on all aspects of everyday life can be a resource for revealing new insights into the human condition at all levels and not solely a corporate or governmental intelligence asset used to serve targeted advertising or profile the population. In the words of Tim Berners-Lee data must be owned by its subject, rather than corporations, advertisers, and analysts. [16]

Further work needs to be done on activist methods of appropriating and liberating data in order to promote this idea that data ownership must reside with the subject of that data with options to share that data with others– for example the location tracking app Open Paths. I have argued elsewhere [17] that artistic engagements with emerging technologies have the power to shape these technologies through the challenging of conventions and the generation of new user practices, this work is seen to follow in this logic.

Notions of Vines as performances in data have been lightly sketched in this paper but further work is needed to develop this more fully. Future work will be to perform further data-analysis on the 24h Social database to classify and categorize the types of performances present. The methodology for capturing Vine content has proved to be robust but will be improved to include effective real-time capture from Vine. The existing database will be expanded through capturing additional days of Vines and running comparative analysis to uncover changes over time.

REFERENCES


Figure 3. 24h Social Installation


