Promoting the Social over the Media through Art
Carmin Karasic - February 2012

This paper discusses *SjansMachine* (chance machine) (2010) a hybrid new media installation that matches participants based on movie genre preferences. The artwork 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. This paper limits social networking to Facebook, because Facebook friending inspired the artwork. *SjansMachine*'s main purpose is to bring Facebook style friending into physical space, a process that I refer to as 'speed friending'[1]. The artwork 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 immediately raise the following questions: How have Facebook and online dating sites modified social behavior? What happens when the virtual friend is brought into physical space? How has online dating influenced interpersonal attraction? How does *SjansMachine* expose expectations about companion selection? These questions and their implications are addressed in the following pages.

*SjansMachine***: The Artwork**

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[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 physical space.
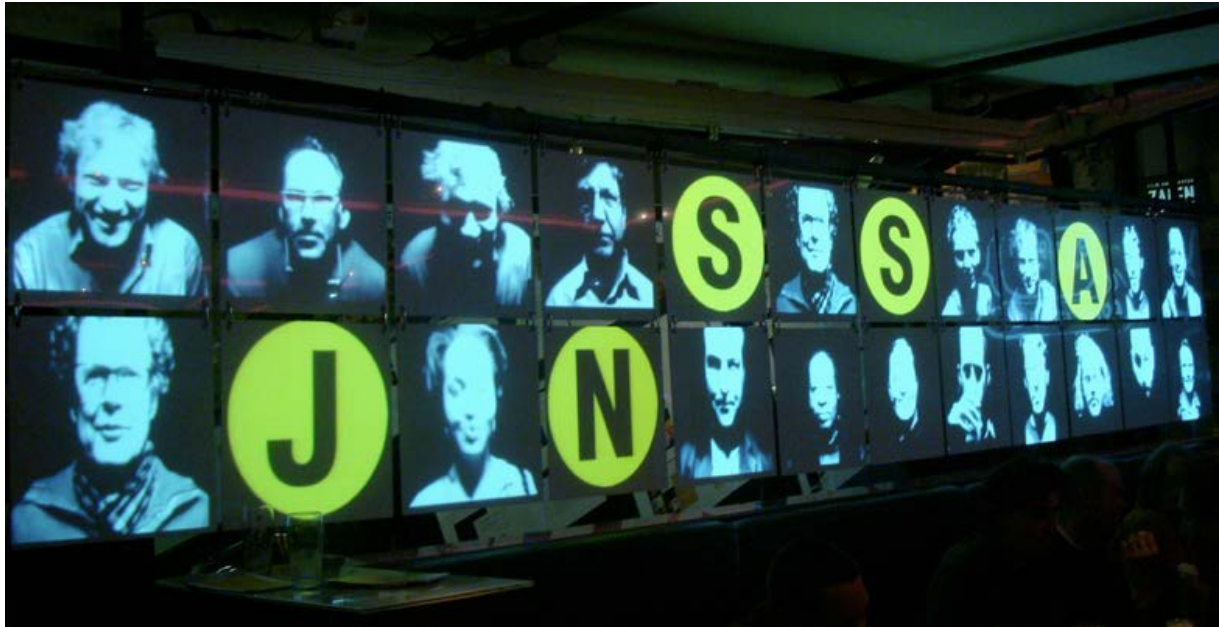
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photo credit: Olga Mink

SjansMachine[2] is an interactive new media artwork created in 2010 by new media artists Carmin Karasic, Olga Mink, and Rolf van Gelder. The artwork consists of a series of black and white portraits of participants, and a photo booth for taking each participant's portrait. These portraits are projected on two rows of 12 semi-translucent Plexiglas squares, creating a 6-meter x 1-meter wall, which is suspended from the ceiling. Each square briefly displays a portrait, as several times per second, random portraits are relocated on the squares. This highly animated display creates the instantly engaging *SjansMachine* wall.
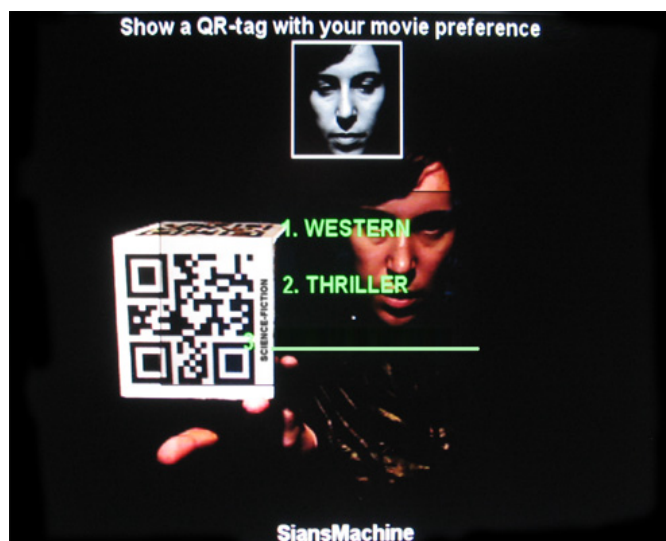
The wall of flashing portraits draws the participant to *SjansMachine*. She or he steps into the photo booth out of curiosity. Inside the booth, the participant sees him or herself on a computer screen embedded in the photo booth wall. Suddenly the *SjansMachine* camera detects a face and the participant's portrait is captured. Two hand-sized cubes are on a small shelf below the screen. Each cube surface has text and a QR code[3] to identify a different movie genre: 'drama', 'action', 'thriller',

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[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 in 2011.

[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.

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'comedy', etc. The screen prompts the participant to use the cubes to enter their three favorite movie genres. The participant intuitively holds a cube in front of the screen to enter their genre choices. After the third genre is entered, a robotic voice says, "Go see yourself on the *SjansMachine* wall." The participant exits the booth to find their portrait added to the projection.

Currently the match logic does not include gender. However match logic can be modified for site-specific criteria. *SjansMachine* matches participants based solely on their favorite movie genres, because thus far curators have opted for this criterion. Every 15 to 20 minutes *SjansMachine* calculates and displays the 'best match'. If the matched participants approach the bar together, they are each treated to a free drink to enjoy as they get to know each other.

Meanwhile *SjansMachine* algorithms continue to subjectively decide when to snap portraits, match participants, and publically display these matched participants. Mixing face detection, QR codes, humor, and indeterminacy the artwork engages participants in a form of speed dating. The face detection technology alludes to our digital presence, which often precedes us. The publically displayed uncensored 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 a personal fact upon the initial meeting. 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 highlights the generally accepted act of freely and permanently surrendering control of personal data for digital storage and manipulation.

"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

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ways of looking at the world,"- Sherry Turkle, 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 number[4] 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]

In 2004, Mark Zuckerberg said, "Let there be Facebook". As a 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 modern verb. Facebook behavior patterns evolved into a new verb and six new definitions of friend[6]:

- **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.

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[4] Wilkins, A. (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] Van Petten, V. (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/

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- **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.
- **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 2012[7], 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, a subtle deautomatism of friendship that leads to many Facebook profiles reporting totals of hundreds, even thousands of 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 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.

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[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] Goldsmith, B. (2009, November 17). *"Unfriend" named word of 2009*. (M. Fahmy, Editor) Retrieved November 10, 2010, from Reuters: http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/11/17/us-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

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Resistance to Facebook is futile and assimilation is inevitable. 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 that approximates everything yet represents no specific thing. An aspect of this loss of individuality 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"! The downside is adapting to the conveniences can become habits that grow into addictions. Some addicts become Facebookaholics, and 'Like' one of the many Facebookaholics Facebook fan pages. Other addicted users become obsessed with the ease of networking and maintaining continuous connectivity to friends and information. Still others jeopardize their job, or worse, due to multiplayer simulation games addiction[10].

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[10] Kohler, C. (2010, May 19). *Farm Wars: How Facebook Games Harvest Big Bucks*. Retrieved November 11, 2010, from Game Life Wired.com: http://www.wired.com/gamelife/2010/05/farm-wars/all/1

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Life online and Facebook seem to be rewiring users. A recent study from the University College of London[11] questioned whether social media is developing users' brains in a new way, affecting the way users interact with the world. They found a direct correlation between the grey matter in users' brains and the amount of Facebook friends the users have. In Italy researchers found a correlation between Facebook usage and "a positive emotional state and high arousal"[12]. 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 dangerous because criminals may take advantage of it.

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. 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.

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[11] Fleming, N. (2011, October 19). *Facebook friend tally is associated with differences in brain structure*. Retrieved February 20, 2012, from The Guardian: http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2011/oct/19/facebook-friend-differences-brain-structure

[12] Hauer, S. (2012, February 16). *New studies examine reasons for Facebook's popularity*. Retrieved February 20, 2012, from The Marquette Tribune: http://marquettetribune.org/2012/02/16/news/facebook-new-studies-examine-reasons-for-facebooks-popularity/

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Speed friending starts when *SjansMachine* publically 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 publically 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'.

SjansMachine as Flirt Machine

"*SjansMachine* is better than online dating, because it's free, and I can see the ladies, not just their photos!" beamed a young man. Entering movie genre preferences to find a potential partner, is nothing compared to the amount of data users pay for the privilege of entering on dating websites. Yet dating websites are now more popular than pornography websites.[13] Any previous stigma associated with dating sites is fading fast. Over 40% of singles between 25 and 50 have tried an online dating service.[14]

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 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.

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[13] Mitchell, R. L. (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

[14] Harris, S. (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

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Dating sites are expensive and time consuming, yet they are wildly successful because they combine low risk mate seeking with the prospect of a big win. Browsing a dating site is also much easier than talking to a stranger. The non-threatening experience provides a safe way to find a partner, in which a rejection hardly matters because it is unlikely that emotional ties have yet developed, and there are so many other available choices.

Computer enhanced matchmaking accounts for several changes in interpersonal social interactions. The anonymity of online dating sites produces deautomatized spaces in which tradition, taboos, and social boundaries can be pushed aside as users create complex databases of desirable qualities. For example, rather than wait for family and friends to find a partner for them, women are personally seeking a partner for love[15]. Users are more likely to speak their mind, when the hunt for a partner is primarily data driven and lacks emotion. There is no reason to withhold requests and opinions, because the sooner the user can eliminate a candidate, the sooner the user can move on to the next prospect. Mate seeking is no longer limited to local options either. The web offers easy access to searches for exotic partners, allowing adventurous mate seekers to extend their search across geographic boundaries.

Media consumption, production and interaction have expanded through web technologies. Evolving digital environments offer novel alternatives for establishing tailor made relationships. Trends in online dating include numerous options that augment typical dating sites for finding a partner:

- Background checkers that check personal profile information and criminal history
- Virtual dating with avatars
- Mobile phone dating
- Science dating, such as matches based on DNA testing or handwriting analysis
- Niche dating, such as matrimony sites in India, religious-oriented sites, one-night stands, cybersex, fantasy, LGBT sites

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[15] Agbinya, J. (2007). *Impact of Internet on African Female Social Behaviour: Issues Raised By Online Dating Sites.* [Report] University of Technology, Sydney, Australia, Engineering. Sydney: University of Technology.

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- Web apps that help matchmakers find a partner for someone else

Social media also encourages 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. Since beauty is equated with youth, users lie about their age. Women say they weigh less, and men say they are taller and have higher incomes. Some users even post photos of others as their own.

Contrarily *SjansMachine* doesn't allow its participants to present their 'best' self. 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. The participant is instantly portrayed on the *SjansMachine* wall, making assumed privacy suddenly public. This deautomatized moment presents a layer of voyeurism, revealing an aspect of *SjansMachine* that is more confrontational than social media.

Conclusion

Like social media, *SjansMachine* presents data driven friend suggestions. Emerging technologies, such as face detection and QR codes, are playfully introduced to the public. *SjansMachine's* subjective logic for capturing portraits and matching participants highlights ways in which technologies guide our behavior.

SjansMachine calls attention to amount of time we spend socializing and seeking others via social media in real-time and asynchronously. No matter how attractive and theoretically perfect the digital representation; photos, posts, and data are always merely signifiers. *SjansMachine* brings participants together in a common physical location, who might not meet each other otherwise. The artwork lowers the barrier for approaching a stranger, and the match preferences serves as a catalyst for conversation. The free drinks are an incentive to participate because participants have a chance to win, and nothing to lose. Unlike the confirmed friends in social media or the calculated matches of dating sites, *SjansMachine* adds a layer of

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randomness. It is free and fast and participants could 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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