

Notes on the E.E.G. Kiss Project by Lancel/Maat

By Geert Lovink

“When I kiss you, I can taste your soul.” Terri Guillemets

Starting point to discuss Lancel/Maat’s E.E.G. Kiss project could be its contrast to the selfie. What’s striking about the selfie cult are not so much the cultural and regional differences (as brilliantly documented in Lev Manovich’s Selfie City installation) but the technological homogeneity of these selfie moments. The pressures on the subject-as-user to share the compulsive exhibition of the present with others results in a perverse update of Vilem Flusser’s apparatus concept in photography theory. What’s expressed in the compulsive selfie is the not just the template culture of the social media platforms and technical specifications of smartphone lenses and the (default) settings of its software, but also the victory of logistics, with its massive online services, broadband and datacentres that all ‘eat into’ the image in an unconscious manner. Instead of ego presence of the selfie, EEG Kiss presents us with a shift towards the inner experience with the other.

Lancel and Maat’s techno-performance of colliding wetware captures the intimate act of kissing in a time-based fashion. Their autograph of love emphasizes the social aspect: we never kiss alone. No auto-erotic kiss but a collective experiment that goes way beyond the self-centred exhibitionism that defines our social media age. The installation opens up a space of free interpretation. Despite the neuro-scientific look and feel, users have to be made aware that the produced graphs of their kiss do not contain an eternal truth. The displayed data are imagined intensities; no medical evidence of whatever, ever. The data visualisations merely represent our obsessive techno-culture.

In an epic quest to invent new interfaces and tools that will help us to develop the visual language that defines our era, some artists are willing to take risks—not just with their reputation. They ask the question: what’s the quantified kiss? The risk in the case of EEG Kiss is an obvious one and goes beyond the danger of being appropriated by ‘the system’. What if our kisses are stored in databases against our will, analysed by algorithms owned by banks that decide over home loan applications? An all too passionate kiss can indicate that the wild romance will be ended up in a dramatic divorce. A flat and boring kiss will transmit the same message. This puts the motive of the ‘stolen kisses’ in another context. All too easily, networked data facilitate the most absurd readings into a situation.

Rebel souls will arise and claim that united spirits will never be documented. Why store an act of human intimacy in a machine, when the real issue is our acute loss of memory—of any experience. How can we train our bodies to, again, store our vital data? Instead of administering the last remaining expressions of us, becoming human, artists arise against the technological elimination of our instincts. The quantified service is the problematic figure here, the willing researchers that smoothen the clean agenda of the virtual sex industries. Instead, let’s investigate together how the fluids, flowing together, can short-circuit our cynical architectures of power. As Billy Holliday said: “A kiss that is never tasted, is forever and ever wasted.”

This essay by Geert Lovink will be included in the catalogue by Digital Synesthesia Group, Department of Digital Art/University of Applied Arts, Vienna. The Digital Synesthesia Group is initiated by Katharina Gsöllpointner, Ruth Schnell, Romana Schuler, Jeffrey Shaw, Peter Weibel. They invite artists and researchers working on the theme of Digital Synesthesia. This essay is about the work EEG Kiss by artist and researchers Lancel /Maat. The catalogue will support two exhibitions showing the works of the Digital Synesthesia Group: ‘ISEA’ in Hongkong 2016; and ‘DIGITAL SYNESTHESIA’ at the Angewandte Innovation Lab (AIL), University of Applied Arts Vienna.