

## Golan Levin

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As a viewer who is decades older than the age group represented in [Golan Levin's \*The Dumpster\*](#), I find that reading beyond a small sampling of posts in the work is a somewhat painful experience. Once the initial responses of empathy ["Poor girl"] or shock ["What a jerk"], or dismay over the mangled use of the English language subside, I feel a bit numb and awkwardly embarrassed for the posters. It is painful in the same manner as watching a bad acting performance — the sincere intent to communicate is present but it is impossible to get past the melodrama.



However, the elegance of the design of *The Dumpster* ameliorates the triteness of the work's content. The piece presents a visualization of 20,000 posts by teenagers culled from blogs in 2005, in which the authors state that they have broken up or been dumped by their romantic interests. Each post can be accessed via date and gender, and they are arranged on the screen based on similarity in content and authorship. For example, two adjacent posts might read:

- I broke up with Jordan and feel sooooo bad. I still really like him and I hate not being wit him. It's like, you never know how much you wanna be with someone until you're no longer with them. Then it hits...
- well today i broke up with Justin cuz I do nt want a bf right no..but yeah thatz life! hez a nice guy jus i do nt want a bf! okay yeah! anyway I think mand3rz mad at me idk y though hopfully shes ...

In his artist statement about the project, Levin clarifies that one of the goals of the work is not just to cynically highlight the omnipresence of romantic dissolve, but to reassure the authors that "pain which they might believe no one else could possibly understand is actually quite similar (and sometimes seemingly identical) to that of other people." <sup>1</sup> In the next paragraph, Levin clarifies that this uniformity of the expression of pain might actually be due to the limits of the English language, which not only constricts verbal expression according to existing vocabulary and patterns but actually shapes how we understand our feelings. <sup>2</sup>

In his essay about *The Dumpster*, scholar Lev Manovich calls the piece a "social data browser," that "allows you to navigate between the intimate details of people's experiences and the larger social groupings. The particular and the general are presented simultaneously, without one being sacrificed to the other." <sup>3</sup> Both Manovich and Levin describe the work as a group portrait, although Levin clarifies it as also a "technologically enabled assemblage of self-portraits." <sup>4</sup>

After delving into the posts, I kept thinking, now this is a group portrait that Andy Warhol would adore. *The Dumpster* is a bit like his paintings of Coca-Cola bottles and Campbell's soup cans. Just like rendered objects in Warhol's works are similar yet just slightly different, thanks to the imperfections of his screenprinting process, the posts in *The Dumpster* are analogous yet reveal the warts and other imperfections that the Pop artist loved to highlight. Aside from proving yet again his now over-used "famous for 15 minutes" proclamation, which seems to have been manifested by blogs, YouTube, and other social media, Warhol would no doubt appreciate any artwork that manages to concurrently highlight and de-personalized the most personal of experiences — a romantic break up.

The bridge between the social and the intimate that Manovich stresses to differentiate *The Dumpster* from

representational artforms of the past, such as paintings of individuals or groups, is constructed out of thousands of very thin reeds. After all, how can a single post, composed presumably in a moment laden with extreme emotion (hatred, sadness, revengefulness, shame, etc.), possibly convey the full complexity of one's personality and character? The collective presentation of such posts, of these sincere but overwrought articulations authored by a group that age-wise is perhaps the most earnest and vulnerable to histrionic self-expression, is inherently painful for a viewer not simply because the subject is painful but because the communications are so fleeting and raw. *The Dumpster* is a heartbreaking portrait of the heartbroken.

Notes:

1. See "[Artist Statement](#)" tab on *The Dumpster* ↩
2. Ibid. On this topic Levin writes, "This is at its root a Whorfian linguistic conjecture: Our pain may be unique, but because we all use (astonishingly) similar language to describe it, our understanding of our own emotions is attenuated and conformed accordingly." See Wikipedia entry on linguistic relativity and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linguistic\\_relativity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linguistic_relativity) ↩
3. Lev Manovich, "Social Data Browsing," Tate: Intermedia Art, February 12, 2006, accessed at <http://www2.tate.org.uk/intermediaart/entry15484.shtm> on January 5, 2013. ↩
4. See "[Artist Statement](#)" tab on "The Dumpster" ↩