Remembering Aaron Swartz's Ethically Engaged Internet Art Collaboration
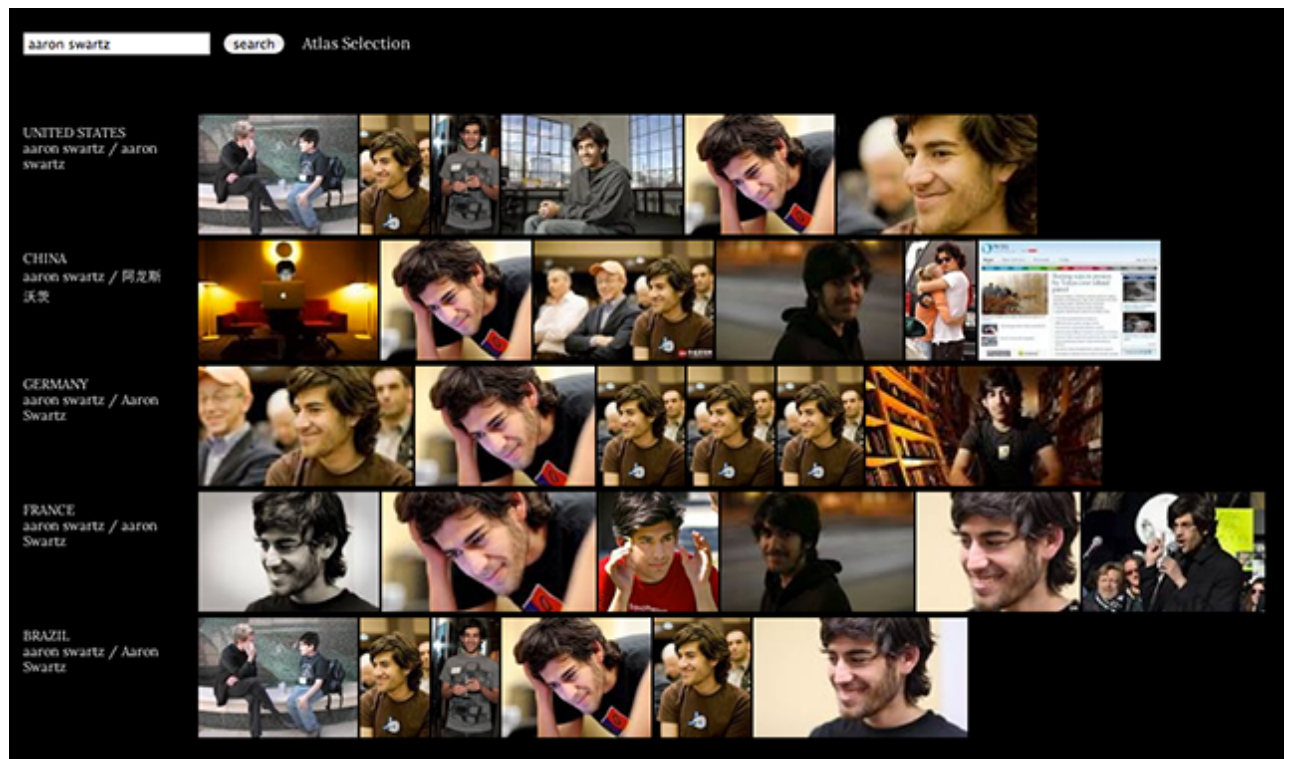
by Ben Davis
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Screenshot from ImageAtlas

Aaron Swartz / Courtesy peretzp via Flickr

Aaron Swartz took his own life last week. The 26-year-old computer prodigy and free culture activist had been under investigation for having attempted to make scholarly documents from JSTOR publicly available, and was facing up to 35 years in prison. This ridiculously harsh punishment meant, as one commentator put it, that "sharing knowledge is a greater crime than bringing down the economy," in the

government's eyes at least. The death of this talented young man has touched a nerve with the public. As a form of protest in solidarity with Swartz, academics have been posting links to free versions of their research.

Swartz's accomplishments are well known. He was a co-founder of the sprawling and influential Internet community Reddit, and was one of the inventors of the RSS feed. Tributes from those who know him describe his interests as multifaceted. And I think that a lesser-known project that he worked on — from when he dipped his toe into the world of art — is worth mentioning as testament to his inspiring intellectual curiosity.

Last year, Swartz was one of the figures invited by curator Lauren Cornell to take part in Rhizome.org's "Seven on Seven" event at the New Museum, which pairs technologists with contemporary artists to brainstorm productive collaborations. Of the various pairings, Swartz's work with photo-conceptualist Taryn Simon was particularly impressive. In fact, in a blog post, I dubbed it "The Coolest Art-Tech Project From This Weekend's Seven on Seven Conference."

What it amounted to was a prototype for "Image Atlas," a website that ran simultaneous searches on locally preferred engines in a variety of nations around the world, and displayed the results side by side. Thus, you could compare what images represented "freedom," or "death," or "America" in different countries — a simple and surprisingly effective device to make the point of how our local contexts shape our view of the world.

Introducing the results of their 12-hour brainstorming session onstage, Swartz explained the impulse behind it in a way that suggests the moral vision behind the project:

> "One of the things that people are paying more attention to... is the way that these sort of neutral tools like Facebook and Google and so on, which claim to present an almost unmediated view of the world, through statistics and algorithms and analyses, in fact are programmed and are programming us. So we wanted to find a way to visualize that, to expose some of the value judgments that get made."

Last August, the work was launched on the New Museum's website as part of its "First Look" series of Internet art. It remains online, now serving the added purpose of standing as a tribute to Swartz's sensitive and critical mind.

"Watching him program was akin to watching a magician in speed and ability," Taryn Simon wrote in an email today. "I've never witnessed anything like it. It looked like a court stenographer, but he wasn't recording something, he was constructing and creating."

Curator Lauren Cornell described Swartz as "a wonderful collaborator, warm and enthusiastic, excited at every aspect of participating in the event, and at every step of realizing the project in the months afterwards." She described herself as "devastated by the loss."

Aaron Swartz's work, Cornell said, "represents incredibly important values and goals that are urgent in our time."