David Horvitz has made books, photographs, posters, and websites, which have been exhibited and shared internationally. His collaboration with poet Zach Houston and writer Ed Steck for the exhibition “As Yet Untitled: Artists & Writers in Collaboration” at SF Camerawork is on view until April 23, and will be published as a forthcoming book by Publication Studio. A volume of Horvitz’s 2009 Tumblr site was recently produced by Mark Batty Publisher as Everything That Can Happen in a Day.

I’VE TRAVELED SINCE I GRADUATED FROM HIGH SCHOOL, and somehow that’s contributed to my suspicion that it’s actually become my work. When I was growing up this tendency to move around seemed to be related to a sense of restlessness or boredom. But now it is more about movements, routes, and channels of distribution. Though there is still the sense of wonder that is always there.

In January, I finished a road trip up the entire California coast, from Mexico to Oregon, by traveling on Highway 1. The trip was for in an exhibition at SF Camerawork. Pretty much the entire coastline of the state is public property, and even if there’s private property on it, the high-tide line to the ocean is public, so there has to be access points to every beach. I took seemingly incidental self-portraits in those public spaces, and then uploaded the images onto each beach’s Wikipedia article. I wanted the pictures to circulate and become public domain, that is, to act as the visual metadata for these specific geographic sites. The entire series of work, titled “Public Access,” is online now, and there’s this kind of omnipresence to that. But on the other hand, I’m traveling and there’s a play between these remote locations, even though it all still leads back to the Internet. I’m on these amazing remote beaches, there’s no one there, and I had to hike two miles to get there. But then it goes up on this online space, where everyone’s connected. Everyone’s there, and you’re not, but you are.

People who consider themselves Wikipedia editors started taking the images down because they noticed that I was in all of them. They started tracking my IP address from San Diego to San Francisco, and the photos got
pulled off or re-cropped so I was no longer in them. It became a debate amongst the Wikipedia editors if this was right or wrong; some thought it was a joke—that I was trying to trick them—and others didn’t care since I was obviously unidentifiable. I wasn’t violating any rules. I have documentation of all of the comments, and it’s fascinating. The threads don’t attack me, but instead they are all about trying to figure out if it’s morally right for Wikipedia, or if it was some kind of vandalism.

Later, I learned about the term “sock puppet.” It refers to the different user names used by one person. I used different IP addresses and user names from San Francisco to Oregon until someone figured out that all these “users” were editing in the same style. They somehow found an outlet to SF Camerawork and there was a moment where they questioned if the images were actually in the public domain since the gallery was doing the show. Then they found out it was my exhibition, and they wondered, “maybe David Horvitz isn’t allowing this?” But then one user deleted all the photos in ten minutes, and then I was blocked from Wikipedia altogether. The entire project was then “repackaged” for Rhizome to now include the comments by the editors, and the documentation of the photographs’ deletion. So the project had various iterations, which was essentially what my original intent was—to create images that potentially would be sourced and re-sourced. It’s sad because Pelican State Beach is the northernmost beach in California, and it only has such a skimpy article with no images, and they took my photographs down. Come on. I went to that beach. I took that photo.

— As told to Lumi Tan