

Data, People, Art, Stanza

Beryl Graham, 2014

I first saw *Body 01000010011011110110010001111001* in the Central London offices of the Open Data Institute, an organisation for “catalysing the evolution of open data culture to create economic, environmental, and social value”. In practice, there is an office full of people making interesting things with data, and the institute has been creative enough to have artwork displayed on the walls and between the desks (ODI 2014).

Standing in the office kitchen, looking out through a glass wall over the busy workspace, *Body* is standing human figure made from clear Perspex horizontal layers. On each layer sits electronic equipment, wires and LEDs – Light Emitting Diodes which flicker and blink in complex ways. The lights are responding to the artist’s own array of sensors located in South London, which record temperature, light, pressure, noise, and the sound of the city. The figure itself is based on data from a 3D scan of the artist’s own body, wearing the ‘hoody’ sweatshirt beloved of urban male youth. This is a departure from some of the norms of ‘the body’ in the context of art (naked, romantic) or of science (naked, medicalised). It also differs from the usual expectations of data – climate data is usually rural (apocalyptic or romantic), and body data very literal (aesthetic or scientific). The urban, the individual or the behooded are seldom expected. When installing the work, the artist was very clear that there was not a representational connection between the data and behavior of the LEDs. This is a deliberate rebuttal of the tendency for both arts and technology, and art and science projects to be viewed as useful services to technology or science in the form of lovely, educational, yet very literal representations of data. As Mike Page pointed out in 2000, artists have resisted this tendency, for example Cornelia Parker’s work *Cold Dark Matter* which refused to merely *illustrate* the scientific concept, but which instead exploited “the metaphorical poetry inherent in many of science’s apparently cool and calculated acts of naming and description.” (Ede 2000, 101). More recently, not only artists but designers and scientists have also questioned the traditionally direct mapping between data, people and social context, even if the data has a medical base. Giles Lane, for example, has described the challenges of working with personal monitoring data:

As our discussions have continued we have begun to explore how we might generate talismanic objects – lifecharms – from personal monitoring data using 3D fabbing. Things which could act as everyday reminders about patterns the data suggests, which are at once both formed of the data and yet do not offer literal readings of the data. Objects which are allusive, interpretative and perceptible, but still mysterious. (Lane 2012)

Stanza therefore firmly places the work as differentiated from the literal visualization of data, but the work is also placed in the company of kitchen appliances, which both satisfy basic bodily needs for food, and aspire to

stainless steel futurology of hygiene and surgical strikes, such as the much-hyped but seldom seen 'intelligent fridge' which orders milk deliveries when your weak flesh has forgotten. In this context, the standing figure is also oddly reminiscent of the automatons of centuries ago, which loitered rather shiftily between technology, fakery, spectacle and science. As Barbara Maria Stafford has described as part of her theory of "A Culture of Operators"

"The eighteenth-century battle against charlatanry, delusive machinery, and 'technological speech' developed into the early nineteenth-century attack on virtuosity. What is marvelous, extravagant, or extraordinary is very often the result of astonishing manual skill, disturbingly capable of creating both genuine and un-genuine effects." (Stafford 1994, xxvi)

As Stafford outlines, the connotations are both medical and mechanical. "To *operate* could signify 'a methodical application of the hand or instruments upon the human body' performed by knowledgeable surgeons. More generally, *operation* had the aesthetic connotation of 'realizing' something for the eyes, as in well-managed light effects" (Stafford 1994, 103). *Body* is therefore flickering in a complex way between the human figure as a manipulated realization of scientific data – an opened-up anatomical model where all is literally revealed, and an artwork which is much more critical about the openness of the data.

Body therefore stands at a significant crossroads of science and art, and at the contested boundary between technology and the body. This borderland, which has in the past been primarily mapped in terms of gender, including by artists such as Lynn Hershmann, but is here, instead, explored in terms of class. This is a time when sexed-up Big Data is providing a frisson for politicians and marketing gurus alike, and in turn exerting heavy pressure on arts organisations to use new media to somehow "enhance audience reach". The risk is that the dominant discourse of digital technologies is becoming about new media as a distribution or marketing tool, rather than as an artform in itself. It is therefore good to see Stanza's *Body* seeking not to control the sublime mass of data 'out there' but to use a much more domestic, human scale, a non-literal mapping of sensor information, and a critical view of open data.

Because Stanza has worked with interactive technologies for many years he has a deep and critical understanding of what that actually means an art gallery context. His work does not, of course, only exist in digital form but also in the less controlled environment of public outdoor spaces. The *Binary Graffiti Club* from 2013, for example, is a series of outdoor projects working with young people. Black hoodies were made, emblazoned with large zero's and ones. As part of an arts festival in Lincoln, UK, a historic city not noted for a vibrant youth culture, the artist worked with young people to stage photographs in public places. The photographs come with titles such as "The decisions you make affect your future" and "When Will The Boat Come In". The young people were also provided with stencils and chalk spray to make contemporary graffiti around the city. Grids of zeros and ones duly appeared

on the stone arches and cathedral closes of the city. These real bodies inhabited real spaces, anonymised by hoodies in defiance of the ubiquitous surveillance cameras and data tracking technologies.

Visitors to Galleries

These relationships between physical space and virtual space are a recurring theme in Stanza's work. His work *Visitors to a Gallery, Referential Self, Embedded* from 2008 uses the CCTV Closed Circuit Television Cameras to embed visitors to a gallery inside the artwork. Grids of images from CCTV in other parts of the building are projected into the gallery rooms showing visitors their own bodies from other spaces and other times. The projectors and cables sprawled across the gallery floor reveal the self-referential nature of the work and the means of production. The installation makes visible those things not usually shown in galleries and reveals the nature of gallery-visiting itself. Artists have of course used CCTV and surveillance cameras for art for some time, including the Surveillance Camera Players who performed with props and subtitles, specially for CCTV cameras around New York since 1996. What Stanza's work does is to highlight a critical view of the current rhetoric about visitor participation in galleries, for here the visitor is not necessarily participating in work voluntarily.

But what does this buzzword 'participation' really mean after all? Is it a euphemism that sells the obligation to cooperate, to play along? Is it a moral imperative, a condition of the social? Is it just a way of emphasising the necessarily plural nature of activity in general? (Berry Slater 2012)

As Josephine Berry Slater discusses in her review of Claire Bishop's book on participatory art, the word has been used to describe a multitude of art and political positions, from Santiago Sierra's "social sadism" of paying people to have a line tattooed across their backs, through more apolitical "relational aesthetics", to Tania Bruguera's performance *Tatlin's Whisper #5* at Tate Modern in 2008, which involved an unannounced appearance of two mounted police, who proceeded to perform crowd control on the massed visitors in the Turbine Hall. Artists who make work concerning issues of participation over a sustained period of time have developed work which goes far beyond the bland and simplistic rhetoric of "audience reach", or reactionary sadistic oppositions. Bruguera, for example, makes public on her web site the detailed contracts which shape the nature of her works and reveals her deeply thought-through understanding of relations between, art, participation and audience. In 2010 her work *IP Détournement* for Centre Pompidou in Paris, she arranged for artists with works in The New Media Collection to give permission to copy their artwork and sell it for 1 Euro a piece on the streets (Bruguera 2014). Artists working with new media have become very familiar with the ways in which it necessarily works with interaction and participation, and disrupts fundamental artworld systems of authorship and Intellectual Property.

In *Visitors to a Gallery, Referential Self, Embedded*, the artist is therefore fully aware of the tendency for ubiquitous technologies to be those of surveillance and control. The audiences here are making their own damn art and have the freedom to make the content of the work itself, but because the CCTV cameras are capturing their image when they might not have been aware of it, they of course are not fully in control. The artwork *Gallery, Invisible Agency and Cultural Behaviours* from 2008 marks a more conceptual approach to a similar theme, and Stanza asks what happens during the process of visiting the gallery as a dataspace - what does the visitor actually do? In this work the visitor does not appear as an image in the work, and therefore sidesteps the criticism that many interactive new media works are more or less simple 'mirrors' where the audience can have the gratification of seeing themselves reflected, albeit with additions or amplifications. This work comprises several elements: the physical gallery itself is an empty room with sensors which measure the temperature, light levels and sound in the space; there is also an online realistic representation of the physical gallery space, upon which appear strange markings produced from the sensors' data. These markings look endearingly like transparent jellyfish or amoeba, which change as the data changes. The nature of the markings can be selected by the audience from a list including "memory" and "space". Projections of this online virtual gallery can then be projected back into the physical gallery.

Again Stanza confounds expectations about the illustrative nature of data tracking and expectations for users to be able to see their own images if they are participating in the work. Here, the audience is not appearing in the work or changing the content – it is the gallery itself to which the marks are responding. What the audience is doing, however, is choosing to select the way in which they view the data – curating in a limited fashion...

Living Art, Animate Bodies

Above all, Stanza knows that he is living in interesting times – what critic and artist James Bridle has called a "soupy period", before the evolution of genres (Bridle 2014). New media art might be swimming in a sublime sea of data, but hopefully it is not drowning, but waving enthusiastically – hampered by the lack of a solid vocabulary of participatory art, but at least not yet too weighed down by ill-fitting critical precedents. Those who have a firm critical grip on data (and often, these people are artists) stand the best chance of creating both buoyant art and of being able to fend off the leakier vessels sporting modish 'participatory' agenda.

Some precedents from performance art and live art (or as Bruguera would have it, "behavior art") are of obvious use here, despite the first impression that new media and technology occupy the diametrically opposite position in relation to 'the live', 'the body', or the 'site-specific'. Rather, it is the particular behaviours of new media art, rather than the media itself, which most disrupt the usual workings of art and audience (Graham and Cook 2010, Graham 2007, Graham 2010). Stanza has clearly drawn on long experience of new media understandings of interaction and participation for his body of work

which spans both highly participatory co-produced community projects, and deliberately non-interactive spaces in order to question the notion of audience itself. His work on the body has involved live events, displaced notions of presence, and bodily data – reflecting the close concerns with bodily presence which have run through new media art since Nam June Paik. His notions of site-specificity have dealt with contexts of both offline public space and the newer notions of online public spaces. These spaces might look very different to traditional art spaces, but as the delicate spidery traces of Stanza artworks such as *Visitors to a Gallery*, *Referential Self*, *Embedded* show, understanding networks can be a beautiful thing for art.

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