

INTERVIEW WITH

Stanza



by **Jeremy Hight**, online via email correspondence, March 2011

Re-Drawing Boundaries, Leonardo Electronic Almanac New Media Exhibition

Curator: Jeremy Hight

Senior Curators: Lanfranco Aceti and Christiane Paul

Who are some of your influences?

Ideas that have resonated with me have come from books like Kevin Kelly's *Out Of Control*, *Fooled by Randomness* by Nassim Nicholas Taleb and *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell. Bill Mitchell's books are also great to read. Kelly talks about scattering robots to do jobs, improving the chance of a result. Taleb reminds us that something is always hidden, unexpected and waiting to happen. Gladwell inspires me to focus in the split second right inside a moment of time and to realize that instead of ignoring the masses of information that bombard our conscious slipstream, we should use techniques to sift, read, and assimilate it all faster; it's speeding up so we should move with it.

In terms of artistic influence, this is extremely diverse and there are too many to go into. Maybe it is enough to say that I go to a great deal of exhibitions and look at the work of other artists in order to understand how we think about the world and how the meaning of art is changing.

**What other areas do you bring into your artworks?
What other fields?**

My artwork is both interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary; the work although arts based crosses into urban studies and computing and is at the center of an interdisciplinary approach to creative practice. I have formally studied art and art history, visual communications as well as internet and multimedia and have been using and researching new technologies and computers in my artistic practice since the eighties.

My artwork covers practices from fine art, art history, video, sound, urban studies and computing. My mediums include; painting, video, net art, generative artworks and time based installations. I explore directly art and technology, and use CCTV, online networks, touch screens and environmental wireless sensors to make interactive artworks.

I explore artistic and technical opportunities to enable new aesthetic perspectives, experiences and perceptions within context of architecture, data spaces and online environments. Recurring themes throughout my career include the urban landscape, surveillance culture and alienation in the city. I use the city as a central metaphor in my work and I am interested in real-time space.

How do you see space and interaction in relation to your works? What things are you commenting on and raising awareness of?

In a sense I work in time, I manipulate real-time information and data from time-based technologies such as CCTV cameras. Charlie Gere suggests that I do not so much 'sculpt time', as 'craft time' (as Andrei Tarkovski described the process of film making). In the context of a culture in which time has increasingly become a commodity, this crafting of time takes on a more pressing and even political dimension.

My focus is on data as a medium for artistic creativity and how meaningful, as well as poetic, experiences of space may result from quantitative analysis of the results. I am also incorporating more

experimental approaches within my methods (use of robots for example) to speculate on notions of privacy, surveillance space and control space.

There are three strands of my working process; this involves collecting the data, visualizing the data, and then displaying the data. I utilize CCTV systems and custom built wireless sensors networks to integrate new media artworks into the public domain as part of this research into the visualization of architectural space and city space.

I believe that what make my work distinctive and different from just adapting narrative threads from other media is the use of real time data from security tracking and environmental monitoring which already exists in public domain spaces. These systems are starting to appear everywhere and can be integrated into artistic practice as data gathering resources. The patterns we make, the visual and imaginative interpretations we give to real world events, are being networked into retrievable data structures that can be re-imagined and used as a source for information. These patterns disclose new ways of seeing the world. The work goes on and evolves without an audience; it is changing all the time. These real time artworks have changing aesthetic states often with infinite and limitless parameters. The artworks once set in motion do stuff and can often be altered, added to by participation. Also by giving my data via XML I in effect give access to my studio allowing input and change from a variety of sources across networks. Some of these artworks have no stopping points they change and evolve without intervention, time is what changes.

Some Questions that I ask in my work include:

- » Can we consider real time data from CCTV, people movement in the public domain as a medium for artistic practice?
- » How can this information be meaningfully represented as artworks to an audience and what are the curatorial issues involved?
- » How can this data and data from sensor networks be displayed in new and original ways and do the

results create new ways of understanding the city and architectural space?

- » What are wider social implications of opening up real time networks and who owns this space?
- » What are the ethical implications of real time information systems for artworks?

How do you see this moment we are in of gps in cars in relation to any utopic and dystopic concerns? Where do you see it heading?

There are patterns, they are connected and the systems that evolve can be simulated and acted upon. As you know, a city is a web of connected networks. In essence, the city fabric is a giant multi-user, multi-data sphere. The city is made up of traffic patterns, pedestrian patterns, bird flocking patterns. Patterns can be seen in the architecture, patterns in the buildings, patterns in the architectural fabric of the urban design network. All of these spheres can be represented by media and therefore by data within the digital realm. All of this data can be interpreted and mediated. It becomes a matter of choice.

Collections of data can be stored to be retrieved later. The mobile data infrastructure becomes a data source so powerful, so interwoven that its scale can only be imagined as metaphor. The size and scope of such an archive, of such rich mediated data experience can support many projects. As such, it can be interpreted via a variety of interfaces.

Cities offer the opportunity for unique types of data gathering experiences via a variety of sources. With this perspective, there are many unimagined threads of data and connections that describe our world that can be explored through wireless mobile networks, within which we can create new artistic interpretations.

The patterns we make, the forces we weave, are all being networked into retrievable data structures that can be re-imagined and sourced for information. These patterns all disclose new ways of seeing the world. The value of information will be a new currency as powers change. The central issue that

will develop will be the privilege and access to these data sources. Uses of this information and data should allow rich new interpretations of the way our world is built, used, and designed.

We need to imagine the city at a different scale. There is possibility to extend our imagination and enable that perception of the city as a dynamic network. We can now put systems in place that can re-employ our perception and thus create new understanding of how this behavior unfolds.

What are some possible areas that current technologies may be going to? Are there aspects we should be wary of?

I believe that there is a new social space that exists in between these independent networks. Future cities will be merged into real time connected data cities, a connection of networks of real time information flows. The results created will lead to mashed up cities and real time performative city experiences. This conclusion, although speculative, emerged from earlier trials using wireless sensors in a project called Sensity

I am interested in how this shared data space can overlap, creating a new space in between which only two nodes or spaces share. For example, in one of my artistic experiments I have merged collected data from various real time cities to visualize this new space, the space where the cities overlap and which allude to a new architectural and urban virtual space. Uses of such information might allow rich new interpretative visualizations about the way our world is built, used, and designed.

The resulting artworks represent the real time conditions of the city. Works like "Sensity", create real time interpretations of social spaces that inform the world (online), and hopefully create new and meaningful experiences allowing critical reflection on the real time city and the social and political undercurrent embedded in the search for the real time city. This might also allow for a greater community of interpreters and beneficiaries to see, and to come to

their own understandings arising from this data about our socially-networked environment. (as the data in these projects is open via XML)

Underpinning these artworks and research are a whole series of potential problems about observation, surveillance, and the ethics of the control space. Imagine walking out the door and knowing every single action, movement, sound, micro movement, pulse, and thread of information is being tracked, monitored, stored, analyzed, interpreted and logged. The world we will live in seems to be a much bigger brother than the Orwellian vision; it's the mother of big brother.

Can we use new technologies to imagine a world where we are liberated and empowered, where finally all of the technology becomes more than gimmicks and starts to actually work for us or are these technologies going to control us, separate us, divide us, create more borders? Will the securitization of city space create digital borders that monitor our movement and charge us for our own micro movements inside the system?

Do you see code as art? Is art thus code? Or is this presenting a false dialectic?

This is a red herring at the center of creative technologies and creative computing. If you paint, you don't make art, you make paintings. No, code is not art, paint is not art, the material is not art. Code can or could be presented as art just as paintings can.

Engineers are not artists although they could, if they wanted, set out through their process and skill to make art that can be discussed within an artistic context and maybe then it can become art. So maybe we should re ask the basic question. What is art? What does an artist do that's different from a creative technologist? I will save these for another day.

Your work spans many areas but has some clear continuity as a body of work that is quite fascinating. What threads have you seen in your

work over the years? Was this more conscious or sub-conscious?

I have spent 25 years making works about the city and the body of work is called "The Emergent City". There are hundreds of paintings, many drawings, as well as all the software based systems installations, and internet artwork that is ready for exhibition... (and could do with some curating) (<http://www.stanza.co.uk/projects.html>)

My artworks seem to trace a path from object based, linear moving images, interactive systems generative, and now to open ended real time systems. They span the shift from analogue to digital and have embraced various shifts in developing technologies.

This is, I believe, work made of its age for its time.

How do you best describe your work? How do you feel about the linguistic/semantic tropes such as "new media" or "location aware" as being tied to your work and the work of others? Is it in a way limiting to need to pin such loaded labels and designations to individual works?

If I were to generalize about my work, there are three strands to my process; these involve collecting the data, visualizing the data, and then displaying the data. This approach has also changing from the modernist collecting of sounds (field recording etc) to a network-based real-time collecting of data.

In the last twenty years, there has been a significant shift in audio visual artists' practice from linear expressions, to interactive (user controlled) mediations, to generative (evolving) and then network-based (real time) systems. Online, this space expands the whole notion of the artist's studio.

My focus is on the things that change, the flow, the data that describes our experience of the city as space, data from all sides in systems that can be mediated by all, with varying visualizations communicated over the internet and represented onto different display systems. Although there are theoretical aspects to my work, I am a practice-

based artist...in other words I make stuff.

The internet exists in virtual space, harvesting assets that can be arranged and re-composed in real time. It also exists as my studio space where my ideas and artwork are presented to audiences globally as they develop; a sort of open source open studio available for the public to wander in. So, for me, the internet is used as space for experience and space for making. It is a unique space with properties of its own that can be exploited using developing technologies of the internet for a whole host of projects.

My work has covered experiments in these areas and traced a shift in practice from modernist approaches of asset gathering (linear construction) to arrangements of datasets in fixed lists or databases (interactivity) to new approaches of mining information across networks in real time (generative and real time systems).

I now make these mediated visualizations created using my own hardware systems to allow real time data via XML gateways open control and trust through networks. I have made numerous XML gateways to open up my work, (assets and data) for others to use. I have done this in projects including soundtoys.net project, the soundcities.com project and the Sensity wireless sensors project.

This all allows others to make artistic or informative visualizations using my work, at the same time allowing other academics, artists etc to have access to the media and data and information I have created.

What are you working on right now?

I have been commissioned to make a responsive architectural façade. (<http://www.stanza.co.uk/facade/index.html>)

The facade is a live dynamic interface, an artwork that changes its behavior as a result of the changing conditions in the environment. This works by sensing

the city and the environment to make art. The results become representations of the real time spaces and environment of Trondheim in Norway. The environmental data is collected across the urban and environment infrastructure to make the artwork; using custom made sensors in the building and around the city. (30 custom environmental sensors units measure, light, noise, sound, humidity, and temperature). This data is turned into an online real time visualization of the space. The output from the sensors display the real time environmental and emotional state of the city online in real time and the information will be used on the façade and online interface to control it.

'Capacities' by Stanza. (<http://www.stanza.co.uk/capacities/index.html>)

I am planning a much larger version of Capacities and I am looking for an exhibition for it. In Capacities, the whole gallery space becomes one large artwork made from real time city information and data. The aesthetic and feel of the space looks like an electronic city. The city is made of units, grids, repetition, building blocks. In the gallery city called 'Capacities' the leads, the wires, and cables are incorporated into the artwork to look like a city map. 'Capacities' looks "designed" like a piece of urban design, a city surveyed and controlled. The whole space becomes a map to wander through.

Sonicity by Stanza. (<http://www.stanza.co.uk/sonicity/index.html>)

I am working on the next version of Sonicity for a space in South London. This artwork is a responsive installation, a sonification of the real space and environment. The sounds you hear are the sounds of the changing environment, i.e. the changes of noise, light, temperature of the space is turned into a real time sound stream using dozens of wireless sensors presented as an installation on 170 speakers.

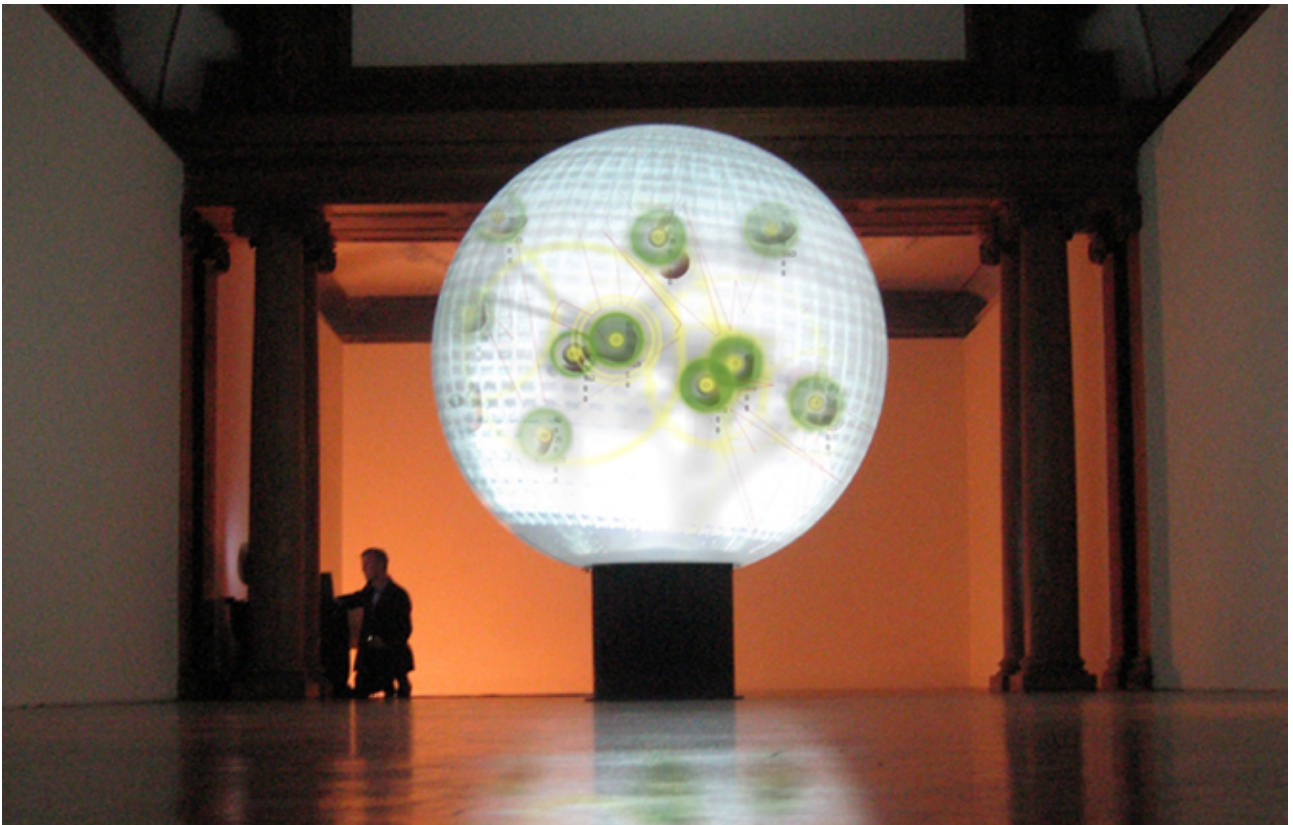
This artwork focuses on the real time space and the experience of the gallery visitor as they interact

with the space, using data gathered from these new technologies. My system monitors the space (the building) and the environment (the city) and captures live real time data (light, temperature, noise, humidity, position) to create an ambient sonification, an acoustic responsive environment, literally the sound of the micro incidents of change that occur over time.

Are there artists doing work right now that you find interesting?

This is a really tough question, because I am so disappointed by what's going on, by what curators are commissioning first and what artists are making (UK perspective) Too much work is led by audience involvement, from the funders' perspective of finding new audiences. And too much uses its reason as "play" culture. However, before the work is made, deeper questions have to be pursued and more valid artistic inquiry would be useful.

A lot of so-called "new media" is dressed up in the technology, and often it's well presented, but it can also be superficial; it can seduce. We have to remember that these technologies are now ubiquitous, available at a snip from app and games stores. So artists have different responsibilities; they need to question the world, not just the technologies.



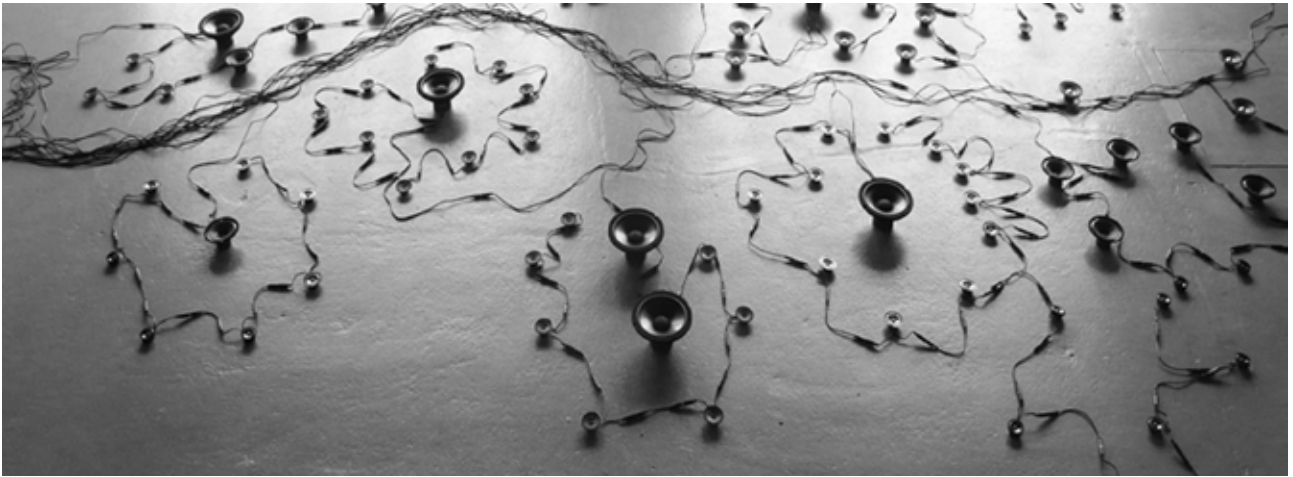
Sensity Globe, 2006, Stanza. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist.

Sensity

Sensity involves collected data across the city of London visualized to make art. The whole world is a dynamic real time artwork. The city data space becomes mirrored online and the environment becomes an emergent series generative artworks. This is what it will look like when it is rolled out across the city wide environment.

Sensity video link:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/LEAbroadcast#p/u/0/1ZTyNjyBWMg>



Sonicity, 2009, Stanza. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist.

Sonicity

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This artwork explores new ways of thinking about interaction within public space and how this affects the socialization of space. The project uses environmental monitoring technologies and security based technologies, to question audiences experiences of the event and space and gather data inside the space. The project also focuses on the micro-incidents of change, the vibrations and sounds of the gallery using wireless sensor based technologies.

Sonicity video link:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/LEAbroadcast#p/u/1/u4oqpnVgwbc>



Public Domain, 2008, Stanza. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist.

Public Domain

This project investigates the real time gallery space and the experience of the gallery visitor as they interact with artworks and with each other. The work explores new ways of thinking about interaction within public space using data gathered from new technologies. The visitors are “performers” whose movements can be tracked.

The patterns, movement, and exchanges of data in the real space, can be measured and interpreted as an emergent social space and used to make new artworks. New technologies sensors and CCTV tracking systems and facial recognition systems will monitor the space, track public interactions, and provide “interpretative” responses via the clusters of visitors within the gallery.

This project and artworks investigate the real time gallery space and the experience of the gallery visitor, using data gathered from new technologies that can be used for tracking and measuring qualitative experiences. The objective is to explore new ways of thinking about interaction within public space and how this affects the socialization of space. While questions of public participation, public space and public technologies are well known discourses in the development of wireless, mobile and context-aware technologies, little systematic attention has actually been given to what constitutes the public who are visitors to the gallery.

Artist's statement

Stanza creates a visual artworks informed by critical analysis of city spaces. Stanza researches data within cities and how this can be represented, visualized and interpreted as artworks. Data from security tracking, traffic, and environmental monitoring can has been used to make artworks. These investigations have created new ways of comparing, conceptualizing and then visualizing complex concepts related to the relationship of emergent data and real space in the built environment.

Stanza has made a series of modular artworks that express the possibilities for our data-mediated future. There are three strands to his working process; this involves collecting the data, visualizing the data, and then displaying the data. The outputs from the online interfaces and online visualizations have been realized as real time dynamic artworks as diverse as installations, and real objects, made out of new display materials re-located back in physical space.

In all his artwork he tries to exploit the changing dynamics of city life as a source for creativity to create meaningful artistic metaphors. Stanza utilizes new technologies and integrates new media artworks into the public domain as part of this ongoing research into the visualization of city space. In essence he is researching data as a medium for creativity and how new experiences of our cities may result.

His work has focused on new technologies and their relationship to urban space. In recent years he has spent time researching sensors, motes, CCTV, display technologies and interactive architectures. The body of work, 'The Emergent City' incorporates investigations into movements of people, the pollution in the air, the vibrations and sounds of city spaces. The archives of this data are controlled via bespoke online interfaces which have been re-formed and recounted into real time experiences, making emergent artworks.

By investigating these data structures Stanza creates new metaphors relevant to the experience of

the city and the environment. The patterns we make, the visual and imaginative interpretations we give to real world events, are already being networked into retrievable data structures that can be re-imagined and source for information. These patterns disclose new ways of seeing the world. The value of gathering and re-presenting this data in artistic form, and then analyzing its impact and influence, lies in making meaning accessible to a wider audience.

'The Emergent City' has become a series of works that are affecting and effecting incorporating unique patterns that move around as you move around that are based on your data.

Bio

Stanza is an internationally recognized artist, who has been exhibiting worldwide since 1984. His artworks have won prestigious painting prizes and ten first prize art awards including Vida Life 6,0 First Prize, SeNef Grand Prix, Videobrasil First Prize, Stanzas art has also been rewarded with a prestigious Nesta Dreamtime Award, an Arts Humanities Creative Fellowship and a Clarks bursary award.

His artworks have been exhibited globally with over fifty exhibitions in the last five years including Venice Biennale, Victoria Albert Museum, Tate Britain, Mundo Urbano Madrid, New Forest Pavilion Artsway, State Museum, Novorsibirsk. Biennale of Sydney, Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo Mexico, Plymouth Arts Centre, ICA London, Sao Paulo Biennale.

His mediums include painting, video, prints, generative artworks and installations. Stanza is an expert in arts technology, CCTV, online networks, touch screens, environmental sensors, and interactive artworks. Recurring themes throughout his career include the urban landscape, surveillance culture and alienation in the city.

Educated in fine art at Goldsmiths College in the early eighties he later went on to study at

Greenwich University and Central Saint Martins Art College London. Stanza returned to Goldsmiths College as an AHRC arts research fellow. He is a pioneer of net art and was one of the first to use internet art as a medium. His websites and net specific artworks have been online since 1995. In the last ten years these online projects have received over four million visitors. ■