The Case of the Absent Artist

A Body of Evidence

of *Mike Phillips*

1
The Case for the Defence.

On the seventeenth of April 1962 Perry Mason, the legendary defence attorney, faced one of his most pataphysical cases. 'The Case of the Absent Artist' (CBS 1962) is an account of a transmogrification that resonates through digital arts practice to this day. The author of the popular comic strip 'Zingy', Gabe Philips, transforms from a cartoonist to a 'serious' painter, bifurcating in the process to become Otto Gervaert. This transformation is only completed when he (both Philips and Gervaert) is/are murdered, the artist(s) remains as a body of evidence and a body of work. Mason is faced with the absence left by the transformation of the artist; the absent artist (or artists) defines a new space, not emptiness but a place resonant with potential.

The following is a re-investigation of this resonant place left by the artist – Philips/Gervaert and how this transformation of the artist is being enacted with increasing frequency. This manifestation of transformation, duality and disappearance is symptomatic of a technological performativity evident in a series of projects and relationships that have informed the development of frameworks, articulated below as 'Operating Systems'. As forensic tools these Operating Systems are 'instruments' or provocative prototypes that enhance our understanding of the world and our impact on it. In the case of the absent artist they probe the space that once held the artist to build a new body of evidence.

This body of evidence itself builds on an evolutionary thread that has run through the collaborative work of i-DAT.org. This thread has emerged through a reciprocal approach that couples the creative practice of artists and performers with the transformative potential digital technologies. The nature of these technologies have radically changed over the years, from a focus on interactive installations and objects, through electronic broadcasting and publishing initiatives, to the emergence of pervasive forms that dissolves the boundaries between and identity of the creator/performer with the role of the audience/participant. i-DAT is developing new tools for production, dissemination and participation that challenge traditional models of creation and consumption, and embrace the shifting relationships between audiences and cultural producers (artists, designers, curators, galleries, etc). These Operating Systems attempt to dissolve the smoke and mirrors of the technology in order to reveal the alchemical processes that facilitate the formation and transmission of human experience. These activities create spaces that are as much the product of the imagination as they are of a technological materiality and enable fluid shifts between states (generally and inadequately referred to as the physical and the virtual). Underpinning the development of these projects is the understanding that the primary fabric for manifesting experience is 'data'. Data, code, behaviour and experience, a series of transpositions in the dematerialisation of the material world.

For the artist(s) Philips/Gervaert these transpositions are reversed, the

transmogrification from cartoonist to painter and from this duel identity to the body of evidence Mason and the author explore - experience to behaviour to code to data. 'The Case of the Absent Artist' is a 'cold case' that may well have been solved by Perry Mason on a material level. However, the evidence suggests that the artist's absence has left a framed space that has yet to be fully understood. In reopening this case the author brings together evidence from a number of projects, some historical and some contemporary, but all of which bare witness to the significance of the absent artist.

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Corporeal Archive.

"There were no corpses in the time-tombs, no dusty skeletons. The cyber-architectonic ghosts which haunted them were embalmed in the metallic codes of memory tapes, three-dimensional molecular transcriptions of their living originals, stored among the dunes as a momentous act of faith, in the hope that one day the physical recreation of the coded personalities would be possible."
(Ballard 1992, 22-23)

Exhibit number 1: The Liquid Reader.
The idea of the a corporeal archive emerged as a real time archival process that attempted to capture, articulate and disseminate 'unstable' 'difficult' or 'live' body-based media (particularly forms of dance, theatre, and performance art) through software and conceptual tools. The prototype 'Liquid Reader' (Liquid Reader™ v1.1) was a 'Performance Research e-Publications/ Liquid Press' partnership, an ongoing collaborative project between Ric Allsopp (Performance Research) and Scott deLahunta (Writing Research Associates) and the author. These prototypes explored the reciprocal relationship between 'live' performance and its dissemination through other media, how ephemeral, body-based practices can be captured, analysed, shared and communicated.

A particular example of this collaboration is 'read/write/fold Architecture' (Phillips, Speed, etal 2004). 'read/write/fold Architecture' is a multidimensional manufacturing and distribution system for generative architecture. 'read/write/fold Architecture' allows the user to write - read - modify - print and assemble scale models of generative architectural forms and spaces. Generated in collaboration with the performer Eve Dent, the software is a digital reader that incorporates code captured from a building. The code is generated through a vision system that captures the movement of the performer as she interacts with the architectural space. The traces generated by the code define a new temporal architecture that is represent within the software as dynamic 3D forms. These new forms can be viewed as virtual 3d models, before being printed and folded to construct 'real' 3d models.

'read/write/fold Architecture' is a perfect manifestation of the conundrum of the Perry Mason case. The performer, through a set of interactions defines a temporal architecture but is removed from the final

playback of the artefact. She defines the space but through it's re-enactment is removed from it, remaining only as a digital ghost that haunts the building. As with Philips/Gervaert, Dent is transformed from one state to another before being manifest through her absence. As with most software the creative act of its construction is masked by actions of the user, in this case the physical performer is twice re-moved and provides just the base data as a temporal substrate for the work itself.

3
A Body of Work.

Exhibit number 2: Visceral Canker, Psalms and Autoicon.

The significance of the absence of the artist has been critical to the emergence of the author's digital agenda. A series of collaborative projects with the artist Donald Rodney have affirmed the significance and potency of absence. In 1988, Rodney's death was greatly exag-gerated by the magazine 20x20. Proud of this early retirement form the art world and continued to prove them wrong for another ten years before the inevitable happened. Inevitable at such an early age be-cause he suffered from Darwinian curse, sickle Cell Anaemia is a long slow degenerative disease that resulted in Rodney's incarceration in hospitals and various technological apparatus. The result of this life-time of physical atrophy was a creative mind that had a chillingly sur-gical perspective on the human condition. His physical condition pro-vided an emotive palette for the acute and richly disturbing political creations that populated his shows, with pieces literally etched from his body. His absence is acutely missed but it remains framed by a body of work that survives him. He left a data trail of information; photographs, X-ray's, scans, measurements, data, scars, and imprints that remain as perfomative works in themselves.

 'Visceral Canker' (Rodney 1990), now in the Tate collection, was a collaboration that incorporated the artist's own blood. Like many of his works, Visceral Canker contained elements of his own body, such as skin and scars. Installed in a Napoleonic gun battery in Plymouth as part of the TSW Four Cities exhibition, the heraldic plaques of Eliza-beth I and Captain John Hawkins were reunited through the peristaltic pumping of Donald's blood, a bloodline commemorating the royal li-cence that authorised slavery in the UK.

The reduction of the body to complete absence was evident in Rod-ney's 'Psalms' (1997). An autonomous wheelchair attempts to articu-late the presence or lack of presence of the body. Unable to attend his own gallery openings a wheelchair was designed to take his place. In-corporating a neural network, the chair would wander through the gal-lery intent on pursuing it's path, only to be ignored or interrupted by visitors standing in its way. It would then desperately attempt to nego-tiate a new path, before again pursuing its destination. The work was defined by a set of programmed coordinates and the struggle of the AI to navigate the space occupied by gallery visitors.

And finally 'Donald Rodney Autoicon' (Donald Rodney PLC 2000), a collaborative project Rodney was working on at the time of his death. The intention was to integrate the body of medical data with an 'expert system' synthesised from interviews, and a rule based montage machine that would allow Autoicon to carry on generating works of art. The project was continued after his death by a dedicated group of friends (Donald Rodney plc). The Donald Rodney Autoicon is a multifaceted record of his body, a 'data' body, and a body that remains active on the Internet. More importantly the Autoicon attempts to encapsulate the creative mind of Rodney. Autoicon will be endowed with Rodney's memories and experiences reconstructed by his collaborators through media clips. The inclusion of a rule-based artificial intelligence allows visitors to enter into conversation and discuss the development of new ideas and projects. Using a set of simple grammatical rules, key words and an approximate matching technique a dialogue is easily established with an inquisitor. A mechanism for generating new works is constructed through a rule based system drawn from Rodney's own creative process and montage techniques.

Now the artist is absent but his work continues, not just by hanging in a stuffy museum but as a dynamic and generative digital system. Again the change from physical to digital is mapped out as a series of transformations marking the slow disappearance of the artist.

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"Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange."
(Shakespeare 1623)

The notion of trans·for·ma·tion ((trnsfr-mshn, -fôr-) n. in and through emergent (digital) 'media'. 'a. The act or an instance of transforming. b. The state of being transformed') as enabling an evolution of form, a transformation from solid to the immaterial, the object to the process and the script to the algorithm. The case for the defence hinges on this transformation and the works being presented as evidence exhibit 'symptoms' of these transformative qualities.

Exhibit number 3: Operating Systems.

In order to embrace and support this transformative process i-DAT has been developing its Operating Systems to dynamically manifest 'data' as experience in order to enhance perspectives on a complex, invisible and temporal world. These Operating Systems (http://www.op-sy.com/) are:

Arch-OS: an architectural operating system developed to manifest the temporal and ecological life of buildings.
Bio-OS: a biological operating system to collect and manifests biological data.

S-OS: a social operating system to model the 'invisible' creative and social capital within urban and rural communities.

Eco-OS: an ecological operating system to collect and manifests environmental data.

Dome-OS: a Full Dome Operating System, a transdisciplinary instrument for the manifestation of material, immaterial and imaginary worlds.

The ambition for these projects is to put data, an abstract and invisible material, to effective use by making it manifest and tangible, through a process of reification its metaphorical and haptic potential are powerful tools for transformation. The first 'OS' developed provided the framework for the 'read/write/fold Architecture' with Eve Dent's performance remapped with the live data from the Arch-OS system. Arch-OS is an 'Operating System' that harnesses new architectural, technological and social dimensions. Arch-OS, 'software for buildings', has been developed to manifest the social, technological and environmental life of a building that is permanently in a state of flux. By feeding on the diverse forms of dynamic data that are generated by a building, it's environment and occupants; Arch-OS transforms the architect's drawings, the brick, steel, glass and fibre-optic infrastructure into a living-breathing environment. Arch-OS combines a rich mix of the physical and virtual into a new dynamic architecture, an 'intelligent' entity, that interacts, responds and anticipates: Arch-OS is a nervous system for multidimensional buildings.

In order to enhance the awareness of the buildings occupants it attempts to enter direct dialogue with its inhabitants. It senses their presence and makes its awareness known. It creates a critical relationship between the space, the architecture and the inhabitants. Through this relationship inhabitants re-programme the building by their behaviour and the building re-programmes the behaviour of the occupants. In this context the inhabitants require a new nomenclature, they are not just inhabitants, a term that negates participation, they are no longer an 'audience', such a definition is too passive. They are audience and performer, a state that again redefines a place once occupied by the now absent artist.

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Good art is like music. It should be enjoyed, not dissected.
(Perry Mason 1961)

Exhibit number 4: Bio-OS.
The transformation and disappearance of the artist is enhanced through the opportunities provided by Bio-OS, a Biological Operating

System. Bio-OS builds on the heritage of Arch-OS, in this case moving from the architectural environment to the body. Bio-OS takes a more granular view of the social environment, focusing at a resolution of the individual. By exploring manifestations of physical, psychological and behavioural aspects, Bio-OS takes a holistic, multisensory systems view of an entity to build reflexive data models of a body over time. Bio-OS allows intimate biological information to be collected from the users body.

This is achieved through:
- the use of biological databases that monitor dietary habits, through food consumption (calorie intake, etc) and exercise.
- biological sensors which measure psycho/physical changes within the body (psychogalvonometer, blood pressure, electrocardiogram, respiration, EEG, etc).
- behavioural sensing, through audio visual monitoring (eye-tracking, speech patterns, motion tracking, etc).
- temporal behaviour, through reflexive pattern tracking (models of activity over a period of time).

Bio-OS offers subtle and complex combinations of biological (in its broadest sense) sensing technologies to build data models of a body over time. The intention of Bio-OS is to make the data generated by human biology tangible, generating a rich mix of quantitative and qualitative data. Collectively these processes establish an open participatory 'techno-ethnography', mechanisms for evaluating engagement and participation through a rich mix of qualitative and quantitative data.

As with the dematerialisation of Rodney, the digitisation of Dent's performance and the re-manifestation of human behaviour through re-programming buildings, the body of evidence is more than circumstantial. The use of digital instruments is slowly eroding the artist's physicality and defining a new place of absence. The body and its interaction with its environment are being transformed into digital traces, lines of code and data that do more than measure what is measurable.

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To sum up the evidence, Gabe Philips, Otto Gervaert, Eve Dent, Donald Rodney, the inhabitants of Arch-OS buildings and our bodies are slowly materialising through a process of transformation. There is circumstantial evidence to suggest that the absence of the artist through these performative technologies is symptomatic of the dematerialisation of the artefact. Is it beyond a reasonable doubt that this dematerialisation of the artefact is the result of the dematerialisation of the museum, gallery and theatre? There is probable cause that this dematerialisation is the result of digital processes and that Perry Mason has a prima facie case. The jury may still be out on this but maybe their absence is also symptomatic of these digital transformations.

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Donald Rodney AUTOICON http://www.iniva.org/autoicon/.STAR, Science Technology Arts Research, University of Plymouth (Geoff Cox, Angelika Koechert, Mike Phillips); inIVA, Institute of International Visual Arts (Gary Stewart); and Sidestream (Adrian Ward); with contributions from Eddie Chambers, Richard Hylton, Virginia Nimarkoh, Keith Piper, Diane Symons; and with support from ACE, Arts Council of England (New Media Fund). (Thanks also to Pete Everett and Elliot Lewis).

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