

Stanza's Object-Oriented Aesthetics

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Stanza may be one of the most prolific and productive artists working today. For three decades he has been making work 'about cities, landscape, surveillance space, and urbanism. These installations are often networked data experiences, fusing networks of live real time environmental data, live CCTV feeds, or live media visualisations', as his website puts it. Much if not most of his work over the last twenty five years has been concerned with the city and with real-time technologies of surveillance and information and has often involved using and even making electronic devices. What is particularly interesting about Stanza's work is that he understands how to use in creative and novel ways a whole range of tools and technologies, which, along with his prodigious rate of production, means that his output is a kind of map of shifting technological realities and possibilities.

He groups many of his artworks over the last twenty five years under the rubric The Emergent City Projects. This goes back to work in the mid-1980s when he was making music videos about 'cities, networks and urban situations' using 'VJ decks and experimental TV techniques', and has continued to this day. Stanza's prolific rate of production, and his continuous exploration of the possibilities and meanings of media and the environment make it almost impossible to track and map all his work, or even to gain an overview that would make it possible to grasp its totality. In this regard his work resembles the cities with which much of it is concerned, inasmuch as they too defy such a grasp.

Despite this, 'Emergent City: From Complexity to the City of Bits', the exhibition of Stanza's work at the Waterman's Centre in Brentford looks at first like a more or less conventional display of art. It occupies a white cube space, which is filled with both sculptural and painterly objects, as well as projections. Yet, unlike much conventional contemporary art, and in keeping with the complexity of Stanza's work, it is oddly reticent inasmuch as it is hard to tell at first what is going on. Things are happening, both on the floor, and on the walls, but what they are is not immediately apparent. Far from being a problem I suggest that this opacity is the work's great strength. Its very refusal of easy understanding is a profound reflection on the world itself, and the degree to which it is available to us.

Stanza's art is consonant with a new philosophical position, or rather set of positions, that has recently emerged, that seeks to develop just such a complex understanding. There are a number of names associated with this, including Speculative Realism, Object-Oriented Ontology, and the New Materialism. Among its major figures are Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost, Jane Bennett, Vickie Kirby, and Timothy Morton, though it must be said that there are many others also working in the same are, and also that this is not to ascribe any overly unified character or set of beliefs to these thinkers. Nevertheless they offer a new way of thinking about the world, one that does not reduce it to what is available to human consciousness.

Art does not, indeed cannot tell us about things in the way that science or philosophy does, but it can tell us something about how we can come to know and understand the

world into which we are flung. To put it another way it offers us an insight into the act of knowing and the way that that knowing is structured and determined. Works of art set us up as observers of different sorts, according to the dominant epistemologies of the context in which they are made. Thus to look at a work of art made in a context different to that in which we find ourselves is to be given a potential insight, however partial, into a different way of thinking about and representing the world. Take, for example, the development of regimes of representation in painting in the West, from the Middle Ages to now. In the former period representation was organized according to a theocentric understanding of the cosmos, one that was coterminous with the dominant scholastic epistemology. Accordingly the visual regime of painting evinced a particular spatial arrangement, in which the size of those represented was structured in relation to their status within this divine economy.

With the emergence of modernity, the disappearance of God as active participant in the world, and the concomitant rise of the human subject as source of knowledge, pictorial representation was ordered according to a different spatial logic, that of the viewpoint of such a subject, a static, monocular viewpoint, separate from that which is being observed. This form of representation was of a piece with the emerging understanding of the world from the perspective of the human subject, which found its most cogent expression in the work of Rene Descartes. Martin Jay goes so far as to describe the parallels between philosophical understanding and pictorial representation as ‘Albertian-Cartesian Perspectivalism’, acknowledging that Descartes’ thought was prefigured by the architect Alberti’s theories of how to represent the built environment. Perhaps the culmination of this kind of thinking was the Kantian division of the things of the world into *noumena*, the things as they are in

themselves, and *phenomena*, the things as they appear to us. For Kant our speculative reason can only know things as they appear to us, therefore the world can only be understood in terms dictated by its availability to human consciousness.

With the new understandings of the world brought about by Nietzsche, Freud, Bergson, Einstein and others in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, new forms of representation emerged, including Impressionism, what came to be known as Post-impressionism, Cubism, DADA, Surrealism, and so on. With such movements new forms of seeing and knowing were enacted that took account of a more complex and fragmented universe than that supposedly available to the subject of modernity. This continued with the postwar avant-garde which engaged in a radical investigation into the very nature of representation, where and how it took place, and for whom it was intended. As such it paralleled philosophical movements such as Deconstruction which attempted the same for thought.

In the last thirty or so years it is arguable that art appears to have lost its sense of critical engagement with the world. Instead the imperatives of the market seem to be the determining factor in the production of art. But we cannot blame the failure of such work solely on the overly close relation between the art market and neoliberal late capitalism. There is a more complex issue at stake, which is the impossibility of reflecting on the world through purely visual means. Vision itself presupposes a certain subjectivity. To be able to capture the entire meaning of an artwork in the visual field is to be set up as an autonomous subject, capable of mastering what she sees. Yet, as theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Michel de Certeau pointed out many decades ago, the world is not amenable to such visual mastery. This is

particularly true in our massively networked culture, in which the means by which power is wielded are largely concealed from us.

Jameson and de Certeau can be regarded as practicing a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, that critiqued modernist pretensions to visual and other forms of mastery. The moment in which they wrote the work cited above is often described as the beginnings of ‘postmodernism’, a crude term encompassing a wide variety of positions, but which can be seen as a general attempt to dismantle the edifice of philosophical modernity. As such it remained largely critical and even negative about that with which it engaged. By contrast the new philosophies mentioned above seek to go beyond this negativity. One idea that is shared by many of its proponents, that of a turn away from what has been named Kantian correlationism, the notion that the only world that is knowable is the one that is available to human consciousness. One of the consequences of this move has been an emphasis on the agency of non-human ‘actants’.

Perhaps the major figure in developing this line of thought is Bruno Latour, best known as a sociologist of science, but increasingly recognized as a philosopher for whom science offers a powerful set of exemplars of a more general understanding of the world. Latour was originally identified with the set of sociological methodologies known as Actor Network Theory (ANT). At the risk of oversimplification Latour’s dominating idea can be summed up as follows: nothing can be reduced to anything else. This does away with the modernist dualism in which a human subject stands apart from and stands over non-human objects. In Latour’s universe all entities have agency, and an equal say in how the world is and how it is understood. Latterly Latour

has been taken up by thinkers connected with Speculative Realism, in particular Graham Harman, for whom Latour is the exemplary philosopher of post-correlationist thinking.

One of the crucial terms in Latour's vocabulary is that of 'black box', a term originating in engineering to denote an element within a system whose effective working can be taken for granted, and therefore requires only input and output. For Latour the black box is the name for those elements within any set of theories about the world that we can take for granted. An example might be the structure of DNA as a double helix, something now almost entirely uncontested, and simply assumed in any discussions of genetics, but which once had to be argued for by assembling what Latour calls 'allies', both human and non-human, through which to defeat rival hypotheses.

This brings me back to Stanza and to the kind of art he practices, which I believe is the correlate of the philosophical ideas described above (without in any sense being illustrations of that work, or even evincing an awareness of it). This possibly reflects the fact that both the art and the philosophy emerge out of the same complex set of conditions, in particular the experience of living and working in a highly mediated 'network society', in which digital technology offers a powerful literal model of non-human, non-biological agency. It is worth noting that much of the discussion and debate in the philosophical circles described above bypasses traditional means of scholarly exchange, and takes place in the blogosphere. (Here it is important not to simplistically confuse or conflate digital networks with the actor networks talked about by Latour and others.)

That Stanza engages with the city as the main focus of his work is apt in this context, given that the urban environment can stand as a good model for the complex interactions and relations that thinkers such as Latour see as governing our world. Indeed Latour has written a small book, *Paris: Ville Invisible*, which makes this exact point. In this book Latour describes the highly interconnected and often hidden structures of the city of Paris, in order to demonstrate the degree to which what we see of a city is only a very small part of a far more complex situation.

Stanza might be understood to be doing something similar with his Watermans exhibition. The first work the visitor encounters is a screen showing a grid of live feeds from CCTV cameras across London. By showing a vanishingly small number of the multiple viewpoints available to the inhabitants of the city Stanza already allows to see how any panoptic view or unifying vision is impossible, and indeed that vision itself maybe almost entirely pointless as a means of understanding the city's complexity. Turning round from this one is then confronted by a large installation occupying most of the gallery space, which is clearly the centre and focus of the exhibition. It is an accumulation of computer hardware arranged to look like a city. It is kinetic inasmuch as lights go on and off, and elements revolve at intervals. The spectacle is compelling in that what might at first just look like a model of a city exhibits some kind of autonomous activity that seems more than merely automatic. The various kinetic and light elements are in fact responding to Stanza's own network of environmental sensors at his home and nearby. Relayed through the internet to a pair of Arduino microcontrollers the captured data determines the actions of those elements.

Stanza's work not only performs the way in which non-human actants now appear to talk to each other, especially in relation to the so-called 'internet of things', but moreover how these conversations take place in literal black boxes, in other words the computers and networks whose operation is both largely hidden from us, and at the same time vital for our everyday existence. But this must not be seen merely as a comment on network technologies. Rather it should be understood as reflecting a more complex and widespread aspect of our existence, in short the degree to which we can now recognize that everything can and does communicate everything else. Much of this communication is not easily available to human subjects. Thus the opacity of Stanza's and other new media work can be understood as the most profound artistic response to both our current mediated condition and to the new ontologies and philosophies it has engendered.

Mark Cosgrove, director of programme at Watershed, the Bristol venue where Stanza has recently shown work, has claimed that 'Stanza may well be the Picasso of the Internet'. This may be a little tongue-in-cheek, as well as an acknowledgement of Stanza's protean workrate and capacity for experimentation within his chosen media, and indeed his technical virtuosity. But it also suggests something else, equally, if not more important. Picasso was perhaps the artist who first understood the implications of radical developments in science and philosophy at the beginning of the twentieth century, and found consonant forms of visual expression. Working at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, Stanza is developing an artistic language that can reflect the new ways of thinking about the world that are currently being proposed and debated.

Recently the term ‘The New Aesthetics’, coined originally by designer James Bridle, has been bandied about to describe the new aesthetic sensibility available via the artefacts of digital technology and computer visualization. Recently Ian Bogost, one of the leading exponents of Object Oriented Ontology, took the idea to task for not going far enough or being weird enough. Taking his cue from his book *Alien Phenomenology*, or what it’s like to be a thing, Bogost declares the need for an object-oriented aesthetics, and suggests that

A really new aesthetics might work differently: instead of concerning itself with the way we humans see our world differently when we begin to see it through and with computer media that themselves “see” the world in various ways, what if we asked how computers and bonobos and toaster pastries and Boeing 787 Dreamliners develop their own aesthetics. The perception and experience of other beings remains outside our grasp, yet available to speculation thanks to evidence that emanates from their withdrawn cores like radiation around the event horizon of a black hole. The aesthetics of other beings remain likewise inaccessible to knowledge, but not to speculation—even to art.

Stanza’s work may be seen as offering something of what Bogost proposes, an object-oriented aesthetics, that enables non-human actants to participate in the processes of representation and art making, and in doing so finds a means of expression that is adequate to our complex, interconnected world.

For me Stanza does not conform to the traditional idea of the artist as someone who operates at the level of human aesthetics. It is rather as if he had taken it upon himself to be a channel for the expanded range of aesthetic experiences available beyond the human sensorium, and find some modes of expression that can make those experiences available to us. There is a sense, looking at and hearing his work, of it being a vanishingly small representation of a far greater set of possibilities, and it is only his human finitude that limits his production. Looking at the work on his 'Central City' website is overwhelming, perhaps deliberately so. In the end it may be that the most meaningful and challenging aspect of Stanza's art is not to be found in individual works, or even in their collective existence, but in their excessive and overwhelming profusion, which hints at the almost infinite range of other outcomes that might also be possible.

Though it is clearly important to reflect upon the malign uses of new technologies, such as their use in state surveillance, and a role for art in doing so, Stanza's work offers something different, which I can only describe as a joyful and even celebratory engagement in the possibilities of these new media, and in their capacity to offer new aesthetic experiences. This does not of course mean that he avoids the complex questions concerning technology and the environment that his work attends to, but that there is also a space for a celebration of what such technologies make possible.

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