

Timescapes Madrid, 1997 - 2005, Stanza, Photograph Software Output 200 cm by 180 cm, © Stanza

In Search of a Digital Masterpiece (or Two): Stanza

by

Maria Chatzichristodoulou
[aka Maria X]

University of Hull

THE PROBLEM OF THE DIGITAL MASTERPIECE

On Thursday 24th February 2011 Christiane Paul, Adjunct Curator of New Media Arts at the Whitney Museum of American Art, an influential and prolific writer and speaker on matters of digital/ media art, was discussing contemporary digital identities at a Thursday Club event – one of a regular series of public talks organized by Goldsmiths Digital Studios, University of London. In this discussion Paul asked: ‘are there any digital artworks that can be said to merit the title of a masterpiece?’ and suggested that there are no works within this area of practice that could be described as ‘masterpieces’.

The term is certainly loaded, wrapped within visions of romance, grandeur and genius that raise expectations to almost a mythical level. In that sense, nothing contemporary can possibly merit the title of a ‘masterpiece’, as only time can tell whether a piece of art can sustain its relevance, status and appeal, and whether it is forward looking enough to move generations beyond its own. But what does the term ‘masterpiece’ actually mean? Etymologically, it refers not to the work of a master, but to the work of an apprentice aspiring to become a master in the old European guild system: it is derived from the Dutch term ‘meesterstuk’, or the ‘work by which a craftsman attains the rank of master’.¹ Other dictionary definitions refer to ‘a work of art [...] which is made with great skill’,² or ‘an extremely good example of something’.³ Does Paul’s statement then suggest that there are no digital artworks made with great skill? No digital artworks that are extremely good examples of this specific area of practice?

ENTER STANZA

On my way out of the Thursday Club event I encountered digital artist Stanza; an artist whose practice I have been enticed to follow since the late 1990s, when he contributed generative artworks of the *Amorphoscapes* series and the net art piece *The Central City* to the Medi@terra art and technology festival I was co-directing at the time (Athens, Greece). Stanza is an internationally recognized, award winning digital artist, pioneer in his use of technology in the arts, who boasts a vast and diverse body of work that spans a range of practices, techniques and media: from prints, video and net art works, to interactive installations, responsive environments, generative art and complex digital ecosystems. He started creating and presenting work in the mid-1980s with pieces such as , a multi-monitor video art installation (originally made as video wallpaper) presented at the V2_ Institute in Den Bosch, Holland (1986); and the *Conundrum* video, shot in the grey cemented mazes of South London and heavily aestheticized in postproduction (1987). Both works use city images and sounds to reflect upon fractured urbanity, communicating a sense of cultural discontinuity and emotional isolation within a post-industrial urban landscape. Though the thematic

strands, aesthetics, and affective impact of Stanza’s work have remained remarkably consistent over the years, dealing with issues such as urbanism, solitude and surveillance culture, his practice has undergone significant shifts: he has moved from creating linear, object-based works such as prints and videos, to (often grand-scale) compositions of (a)live, open-ended, permeable, and unpredictable systems characterized by a state of flux.

SITUATIONIST CITIES

The Situationist International (or SI) movement (formed 1957), ‘a revolutionary alliance of European avant-garde artists’⁴ ideologically rooted in Marxism and Surrealism, advocated the construction of ‘situations’ as a means of fulfilling human desires suppressed by capitalist consumerism. Through their two main fields of experimental study, Unitary Urbanism (UU) and psychogeography, SI were concerned with a critique of urbanism and a re-envisaging of ways to structure and relate to this geographical, architectural and social space. Unitary Urbanism, a ‘synthesis of art and technology’,⁵ envisaged ‘a terrain of experience for the *social* space of the cities of the future’.⁶ According to the Situationists, UU was a move past functionalism in an attempt to reach beyond the immediately useful to ‘the scenery of daydreams’: ‘In light of the fact that today cities themselves are presented as lamentable spectacles, a supplement to the museums for tourists driven around in glass-in buses, UU envisages the urban environment as the terrain of participatory games’.⁷

Stanza also deals with cities: urban landscapes and soundscapes, along with their complex social functions and dynamic networks of interconnections, have been central to his artistic practice. Influenced by the Situationist International since the early stages of his

career, Stanza undertakes a critique of contemporary urbanism that is not defined primarily by restrictive architectures but by surveillance networks and connective data flows. Stanza's cybercities⁸ and data cities⁹ might not directly constitute a terrain of participatory games, but they are playful 'dérives'¹⁰ to fragments of urbanism that gesture beyond the functional and into 'daydreams' – or urban nightmares.

The net art piece *The Central City* (1997-2001), which won an accolade of awards (VIDA 6.0 2004, Videobrasil 2001, among others) and was exhibited internationally in practically every venue/festival that presents net art, is an interactive audiovisual work made for the internet, which offers 30 different versions of urban experience. Stanza's intention in this work is to explore the notion of an 'organic identity' of the city and highlight the tensions that compose this: the natural versus the man-made; the attempts at organisation and control versus the uncontrollable and unexpected movements of the crowd; the organic versus the superimposed; structure versus chaos; one versus many; collectivity versus individualism; networks of information technology versus networks of organisms and urban sites; urban and virtual communities. Net art works like *Central City* and its 'sister project' *Inner City* (2002) visualize the city as an 'organic network of grids and diagrams'¹¹ that is both alive in its own 'organicity' and emotionally detached from human ardour. Stanza's cities are their own organisms, but they are not there (not visibly, at least) to be inhabited by the organisms of other – human, animal or cyborg – beings. Those are urban experiences of seductive data flows, aesthetically pleasing but emotionally detached, beautiful but bloodless.

The Situationist movement criticized the use of technology 'to further multiply the pseudo-games of passivity and social disintegration (television)', while pointing out that 'new forms of playful participation

that are made possible by this same technology are regulated and policed'.¹² Stanza is also questioning the way technology is used to log and control peoples' movements. Through *Inner City* he warns against the ubiquity of technology within modern cities. He highlights the precariousness of contemporary urbanism as our own cities are turning into menacing totalitarian superstructures: 'Data mining will be part of the fabric of the landscape. Everything is or will be tracked. [...] The patterns we make, the forces we weave, are all being networked into retrievable data structures'.¹³

As Stanza delves deeper into creating abstracted audiovisual experiences of urbanism, his works, like physical cities, become interactive. The earlier 'city' pieces are self-generative artworks, which respond to the user's move of the mouse-grid structures. As Michael Gibbs observes: 'What both worlds [...] have in



The Central City, 1997 - 2005, Stanza, Installation, © Stanza

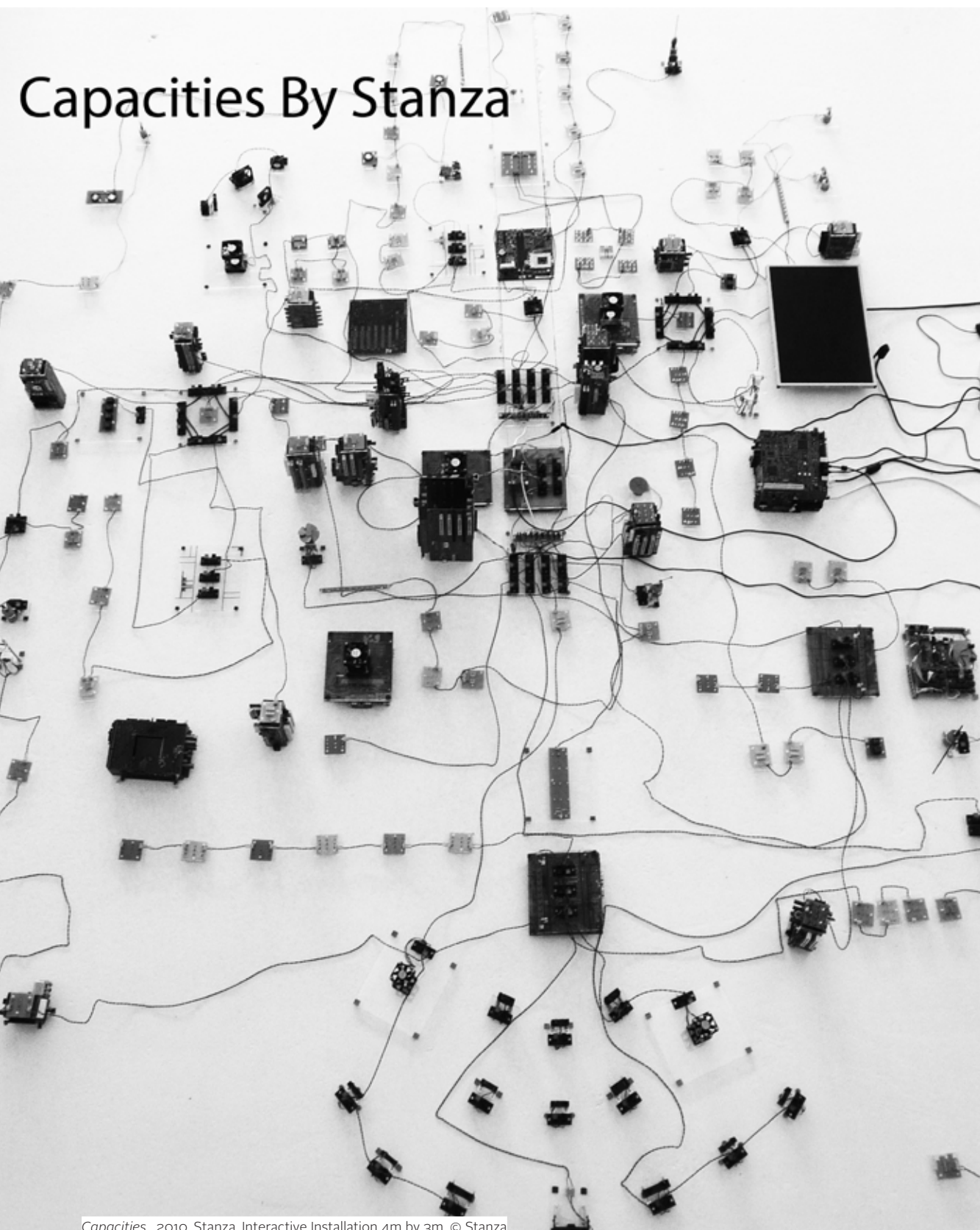
common is the grid, a cellular structure that inevitably proliferates through arterial streets and cables into urban sprawl or information overload'.¹⁴ His more recent works though, such as *Sensity* (2004-2010), *Capacities* (2008-2010), and *Sonicity* (2008-2010), respond not to a single user and his/her mouse moves, but to the whole complex ecosystem that surrounds them. Since 2004 Stanza embeds technology into the urban environment to monitor its 'pulse'. *Sensity*, *Capacities*, and *Sonicity* monitor their environment through wireless sensors, collect real time data by recording every change that occurs around them (the sensors measure specific aspects of the environment such as temperature and humidity), and respond to those changes by visualizing them within the gallery space. Stanza's 'open social sculptures'¹⁵ are not only useful (i.e. informative, meaningful) but also beautiful, poetic, 'the scenery of daydreams'.¹⁶ Those works

are subtly – rather than polemically – critical of urbanism, and of the way digital technology is employed for the surveillance of our every move.

THE ART OF LOGICAL SYSTEMS

Since 1995 Stanza has been creating generative artworks. Matt Pearson describes generative art as 'the discipline of taking strict, cold, logical processes and subverting them into creating illogical, unpredictable, and expressive results. [...] [It] is about creating the organic using the mechanical'.¹⁷ Stanza's large body of generative works succeeds in spawning organic, messy aliveness out of coded structures. Works such as *Biocities* (2003) (exhibited at the Venice Biennale, 2007) and *Nanocities* (2006), both part of the *Amorphoscapes* series, are 'paintings actioned by the interpretation of code'¹⁸ that approach the city itself as code: Processes of city-formation, design, building and mapping; interconnected webs of activities; behaviours of public interaction – all essentials of urbanity conceptualized, translated and visualized as abstracted, generative images and sounds. These interactive audiovisual 'paintings' 'map out emergent city spaces'¹⁹ by performing themselves – their aliveness – differently. Each work demonstrates its own distinct set of behaviours that impact upon its visual and aural manifestation – that is, upon its nature, its character, its very existence. Small changes might entail big differences. In essence, Stanza's generative works subtly unearth and gradually (even seductively) bring to the fore the fact that, within the complex interconnected urban networks and multi-layered city flows we – I, you – are 'both integral and irrelevant, as the movement occurs both because, but also in spite of your presence'²⁰. Those works, says Stanza, 'all disclose new ways of seeing the world'²¹. I would add: ways of seeing the world as a beautiful logical system.

Capacities By Stanza



Capacities, 2010, Stanza, Interactive Installation 4m by 3m, © Stanza

In 1968 art historian Jack Burnham introduced the notion of systems aesthetics for what he termed 'unobjects' (any artwork that cannot be classified as an object in a way a painting or a sculpture can, such as environments, kinetic art, public art, happenings and so on). Burnham explained that a systems viewpoint 'is focused on the [...] relationships between organic and nonorganic systems', and suggested that a 'systems aesthetic will become the dominant approach to a maze of socio-technical conditions rooted only in the present.'²² The historical interest in systems aesthetics in the 1960s and 1970s was directly related to technological innovations of the times as well as the study of cybernetics (itself closely related to systems theory). Thus systems aesthetics stems from a post-industrial condition of technological being (or a *destining* of technological being as Heidegger would put it). Since media art practice inevitably deals with technology as its medium (and often message), it is inevitable that such practices are often characterized by a systems aesthetic. Stanza's work has a clear interest in systems. This becomes manifest not only in the works' aesthetics, but also in their structure, content and 'dramaturgy' (in terms of the development of live, dramatic interaction between users and works).

In a self-conducted interview in relation to his project *Soundtoys* (1998-2012)²³ Stanza explains that his aim is 'to develop analogies for the organic identity of the city as an urban community and make links with electronic networks'²⁴, attempting to draw parallels and connections between organic and nonorganic systems. The city thus becomes, says Stanza, 'a visual labyrinth, a maze of circumstance'²⁵. It is interesting that Stanza, like Burnham, uses the term 'maze' to describe the circumstance that gives context to his work. Indeed his works are often maze-like, and the experience of navigating oneself through those digital urbanities can be complex, fragmented and confusing: one thing leads to another in maze-like structures and

patterns. The repetitive aesthetics make it impossible for the user to be able to account for a beginning or an end in the experience – indeed, one doesn't even know whether linear notions of beginnings and endings do apply. The *Central City* invites the user to navigate him/herself within the experience of a man-made, coded urban maze that grows, shifts and changes in his/her presence – like a 'real' city does. *Urban Generation* (2002-5) collects live CCTV feeds from various cities around the world in real time, and reworks them into multi-layered, abstract patterns and textures – surveillance becomes aestheticized, and exposed.

Stanza's current works go further towards inviting the city and the people that inhabit it to populate and become the artwork. From generative and interactive art such as the *Central City*, Stanza has moved to open systems that collect and re-appropriate real-time data to create multifaceted 'urban tapestries',²⁶ such as the *Urban Generation*. The even more recent installation *Capacities* consists of two elements: a physical installation within the gallery space made from hundreds of electronic components such as fans, leads and motors, which resembles a miniature electronic city; and a tailor-made network of wireless sensors that is embedded within the gallery space and the urban landscape that surrounds it, and which collects data from its environment. The data collected 'include GPS positions, humidity, noise, temperature, and light'.²⁷ The data and their interactions – that is, the events occurring in the environment that surrounds and envelops the installation – are then translated into the force that brings the electronic city to life by causing movement and change – that is, new events and actions – to occur. In this way the city performs itself in real time through its physical avatar or electronic double: the city performs itself through an-other city. Cause and effect become apparent in a discreet, intuitive manner, when certain events that occur in the real

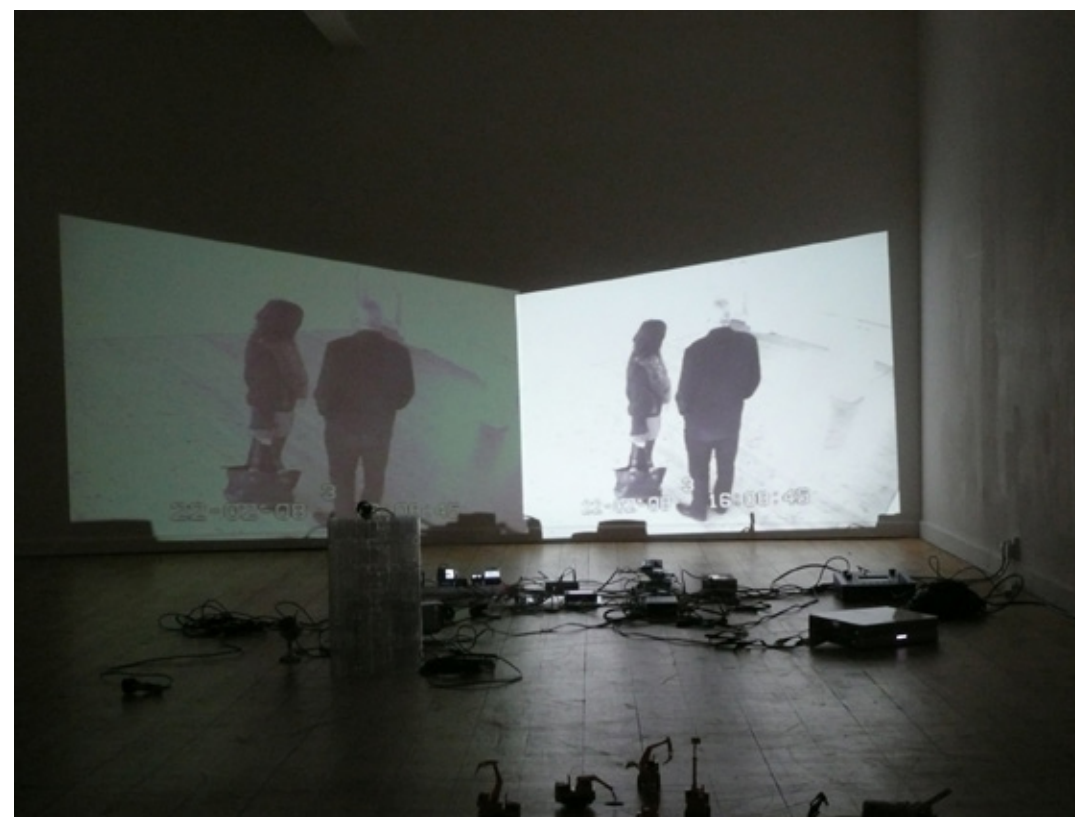
city cause certain other events to occur in its completely different, but seamlessly incorporated, double. The avatar city is not only controlled by the real city in terms of its function and operation, but also utterly dependent upon it for its existence. The co-dependent system of *Capacities* poses questions around issues of interaction, dependence and control within the hyper-mediatised, surveyed, urban environments that envelop the biological, co-dependent systems that human bodies also are.

PERFORMATIVITY

Sonicity, an installation developed the same time as *Capacities*, is also utterly dependent upon the environment that surrounds it. *Sonicity*, like *Capacities*, operates on the basis of wireless sensors that collect real-time data from the surrounding urban space. In this case the environmental changes of noise, light, temperature and so on are turned into sound through an installation that consists of 170 speakers. This is yet another live performance of the urban environment, manifested as a responsive sound installation. The numerous speakers, distributed on the gallery floor, create a physical maze of cables and sound sources that the user has to negotiate within the space. Again, the artistic outcome of Stanza's work is an 'unobject' that becomes manifest as a complex system, interconnected to and dependent upon other complex systems, both organic (human bodies, nature) and inorganic (man-made structures). What is important here, and in the development of Stanza's practice from works like *The Central City* to the more recent *Capacities* and *Sonicity*, is the turn towards the performative due to the liveness of the installations, which all depend on 'real' (i.e. collected from the environment rather than randomly generated) and real-time data. Though the works had always been focused on the user experience rather than simulations of the urban environ-

ment, earlier works such as *The Central City* were nonetheless attempts to simulate the experience of navigating oneself within a city, through interactive digital representations of urbanism. Stanza's current practice does not simulate the city, nor does it represent the city: it is the city. Even more poignantly, it is the city not as it has been, but as it is right now.

Chris Salter, in his book *Entangled*, claims that 'performance as practice, method and worldview is becoming one of the major paradigms of the 21st century'.²⁸ He points at a shift in the zeitgeist that occurred at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, when the euphoria of the virtual (that to some extent characterizes Stanza's early works, as well as several of the media art works of the 1980s and 1990s) was replaced by a reconsideration and re-foregrounding of the physical body²⁹ and, with it, 'embodiment, situatedness, presence, and materiality'.³⁰ This shift in culture that Salter points at, and which one can follow through discourses that re-foreground embodiment and materiality – from Katherine Hayles's influential book *How we Became Posthuman*³¹ to Mark Hansen's *New Philosophy for New Media*³² – is also evident in Stanza's artistic practice, which has shifted from abstract generative representations of cybercities to physical installations situated within a specific habitat and directly dependent upon it for their own being. Rather than simulating or representing a closed structure (object or closed system) those works accurately perform their social milieu as a constantly changing, alive, complex and dynamic open system. Salter explains that, what performance suggests as a worldview is that 'reality' is not pre-given (and thus cannot be represented).³³ What in the past would be a representation of the world around us (that is fixed in time) is replaced by an enactment of the world in the here and now: 'the world is actively performed anew'.³⁴ And that is exactly what Stanza achieves with his current practice: to perform the world anew; to approach the world as a reality that 'emerges over time' and is 'continually transformed through our history of interactions with it'.³⁵



Visitors To A Gallery, 2008, Stanza, Installation, © Stanza

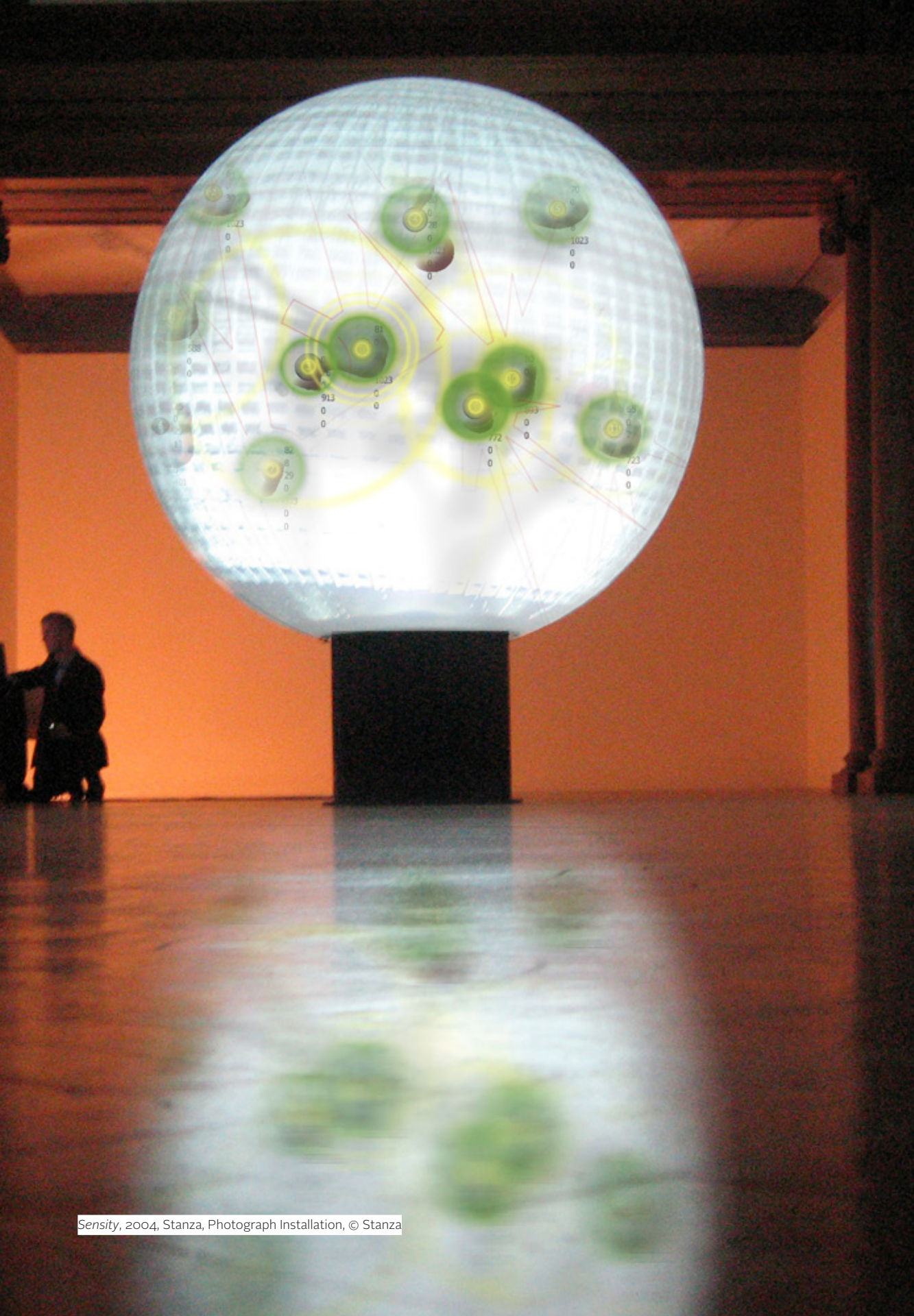
'AFTER PRIVACY'³⁶

The exhibition *Visitors to a Gallery – referential self, embedded* (2008) uses the live CCTV system inside the gallery space to create an artwork where the protagonists are the visitors to the gallery. Visitors to the Plymouth Arts Centre in February 2008 were controlling the CCTV feeds through their own movements in space. Here, the gallery (and the artwork) becomes transparent, as they are turned inside out. What is normally hidden (the CCTV cameras, the CCTV footage) becomes exhibited. What is normally exhibited (the artwork), is an 'unobject': the act of unleashing control (over the gallery visitors) through making the mechanism of control transparent and visible to all. Once the visitors take control over the system that has been put in place to control them they become the artwork and, to some extent, the artist. The – crucial, urgent, even burning – question posed here, and in several of Stanza's works, is the matter of access to data (especially surveillance data): Who owns your image? If we accept that surveillance systems (public, private, as well as private ones that allow public access

such as Google Earth) are here to stay, then Stanza asks: 'will these systems be open or closed?'³⁷ Who will have access to the data those systems collect and often store? Who will profit from them? Stanza's work encourages us to reflect upon the urgent questions of surveillance and data ownership – our own data, the traces that we unwittingly (and often unknowingly) leak on a daily basis as we go about our everyday lives – through the act of laying out in public, 'layering, and re-layering multiple instances of our daily realities, the documentation of segments of space and time, fragmentation and recomposition, bits and bites, moments [...]'.³⁸

CONCLUSION

Closing this essay on Stanza's complex and intricate artistic practice, I would like to propose a brief 'détournement' to Paul's discussion of the 'digital masterpiece'. My personal frustration with the use of this term led me to the Virtual Collection of Masterpieces, of project of the Asia Europe Museum Network, and



Sensity, 2004, Stanza, Photograph Installation, © Stanza

a series of mini interviews with Asian and European students and cultural professionals who are asked to define this contested concept. According to those international emergent and established experts a masterpiece is:

- » 'Original'
- » 'Inspiring'
- » 'Moving'
- » 'Recognizable'
- » 'Memorable'
- » 'Monumental'
- » 'Historically significant'
- » 'The pinnacle of an artist's production'
- » 'The idea of a genius'
- » 'An ultimate favourite'
- » 'The most vivid expression of one's personal experience'
- » 'A work that expands the definition of what art is'
- » 'An idea that influences future ideas'
- » 'An artwork that demonstrates balance between technique and content'
- » 'A work that can change one's life'
- » 'A work that reminds one of the importance of being alive'

Also:

- » 'Context'
- » 'The communication of an idea'
- » 'A piece that starts a discussion'
- » 'A work that communicates with a large number of people'
- » 'A piece that seeks answers to relevant questions'
- » 'A work that is most representative of an artist'

And:

- » 'The wrong concept [in terms of approaching a work of art]'
- » 'A term surrounded by romance and hype'
- » 'A self-referential concept that exists within the framework of art history'
- » 'A very expensive piece of art'
- » 'My work when finished (I am an artist)' ³⁹

I enjoy the diversity of responses to this question as it acutely demonstrates the considerable distancing of the meaning of the term 'masterpiece' from its original etymological (and social) context as well as the tremendous complexity this carries within a current art historical framework. The responses range from zealous protectionism of the weight the term should carry (the idea of a genius), to romantic existentialism (work that can change one's life), pragmatic understanding of an art world defined by global markets (a very expensive piece of art), critical questioning (context, self-referential concept) and, finally, the rejection of the term (a term surrounded by hype, the wrong concept). My favourite response though is the following: 'A masterpiece is a masterpiece because someone said so, and this person was a master at some point.'⁴⁰ Indeed, masterpieces, both contemporary and historical ones, have been commissioned, acquired and preserved by wealthy patrons of the arts, either private or, more recently, public (through museums, foundations, and public art collections). Some expert or master, at some point, pronounced the works to be masterpieces for them to exist today and be historically perceived as such.

Christiane Paul has been one of the most knowledgeable and insightful spokespersons for the field of digital/media art practice within the last decade. It seems though that her statement regarding a perceived lack of digital masterpieces is a proposition consistent with a lengthy and persistent institutional turn against – or just past – digital /media art practices (and practitioners), that has more to do with a consensual numbness when confronted with a new, and radically different in some ways, type of artistic practice, than with the aesthetic and conceptual value of those works. If 'a masterpiece is a masterpiece because someone said so', someone must also dare make this claim within the field of digital and media art practice. And contested though the term might be, I will have to take up

the gauntlet and argue that some of Stanza's works indeed merit to be called 'digital masterpieces'.

Artworks such as the long acclaimed *Central City* and the more recent *Sonicity* and *Capacities* are skillful, technically flawless, aesthetically pleasing, conceptually complex, and politically urgent. Those works are not only extremely good examples of the potency, efficacy and cultural currency of certain instances of digital art practice, but also characteristic of their times in an exemplary manner – as many masterpieces are. *Central City*, *Sonicity* and *Capacities* are the artistic expression of the city itself: they are the digital or technologized Other of contemporary urban mazes sprawling uncontrollable around the globe, seductive and threatening, sensual and treacherous. Beatriz Jaguaribe argues that in a world of 'globalized branding and intense cultural hybridity' it is the cities that continue to provide what Baudelaire termed 'the promotion of the modern' through the 'tumultuous rush of the urban maze'.⁴¹ Stanza's works are the complex, often confusing (because uncharted or unmapped) and hyper-stimulating representations of this 'rush of urban maze'; they are urban fantasies, sensual urban experiments. Those are works that live *within* the 'flesh' of the city; they document it, measure it, map it, represent it, imagine it, drift through it, perform it, and become it. Stanza is an inspired 'poet' of the post-modern, technologized, globalized and frenzied cities we inhabit; and of our own lives in them. He is not a landscape painter, and his works are not classical masterpieces – those are the masterpieces of today, of the contemporary digital age. (Though the term does remain contested). ■

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