Imagining Business

An Interdisciplinary Exhibition

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Workshop organising committee
Paolo Quattrone, François-Régis Puyou and Christine McLean.

Catalogue
Edited by Alex Hodby, Lucy Kimbell and Nina Wakeford.

Texts by Paolo Quattrone, François-Régis Puyou and Christine McLean and Jon Wood.

Conversation led by Noortje Marres.

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Conversation

Extract of a conversation between Lucy Kimbell, Noortje Marres and Nina Wakeford

May 2008, Goldsmiths, University of London

NM: I want to begin with a question about the aesthetics of data. In some ways Science and Technology Studies (STS) can be understood as having made this intervention – of foregrounding the aesthetic qualities of data oriented practices. But I think this had a lot to do with the ethnographic method adopted in early, now classic, laboratory studies. So you had a distancing act of the anthropologist who says "Isn't this all very strange" and looking at pages of data coming out, at diagrams, and machines that were quite deliberately approached as unfamiliar and rather mysterious, from an ethnographic perspective. That is obviously a very different way of aestheticising data than to decide "What happens when you internalize the aesthetic perspective on techno-scientific practice? We are going to take an aesthetic approach to data production as makers." So my first question is what is it like to make that transition, where you say it is no longer the aesthetics of estrangement, which is about accentuating the "weirdness" of material scientific practices in the lab, but performing a kind of aesthetics of data yourself?

LK: I think that the artists and designers with whom I connect have the same the starting point of "I am distant, I know nothing, I am outside this stuff but I do have a process for engaging with it." Particularly doing an artist residency, as the outsider coming into the hospital or the organisation, or the public art project, they do start from a place of weirdness, and everything is strange. What is perhaps different, is they very quickly record, document, capture "stuff". It is led by what artists might call intuition, or what feels right, but there is an analysis going on. It is not even dependent on the way that they make work, what the final result might be. They will take photos, they will sketch, they will make films, they will record sound. And they will also just "be" and perform the artist in that environment, that space, that social setting, and immerse themselves in "stuff" where the stuff could be "Wow, I think the power station is really interesting, and look at these fantastic machines." It could be the materiality of the artefacts that are part of the organisation, and it could also be the people. And the artists and designers I am thinking of, including myself, would start off with that distance, but quickly immerse themselves in the materiality and sociality. And then take some of that "stuff" away, back to the studio, even if the studio involves a post-studio way of working. So those are traces that later come through, and they could be the photos, they could be something that they bought there, or just something that they have remembered.

NM: But they also develop a kind of intimacy with the material…

LK: That's definitely it. You were talking about the separation from the streams of data, the ethnographer looking at the streams of data. These art and design practitioners are saying "I am not going to impose a view about what is going on here. Why are these people doing this thing? It doesn't all necessarily make sense. I am not going to assume things." They speak back to the situation. They may assemble things, which might include some material artefacts. Also speaking back through their practices, their way of speaking, their way of thinking through, and positioning themselves as the artist, or the designer.

NW: You asked about the distancing of the ethnographer and occupying a different position, but for my work the tension is not so much in the distancing, but the tendency within ethnographic work in STS to have a targeted description that prioritised one kind of material. And when you consider early writings on visual representations, maybe within STS laboratory studies, these had a layer of written analysis explaining the work of visual representation. I think the work that Lucy and I are trying to do is an attempt to try something different. And although this is something that is partially being shifted by what authors such as Nigel Thrift say they want to do, it is hardly being realised. So to go back to your question, that movement between those worlds is about understanding that when you move away from that kind of written imperative – and of course there have been lots of experiments with different kinds of textual aesthetics – what happens then when you enter a world that slightly de-prioritises, or completely abandons that, to an object-based or materials-based, or performative-based experience?

NM: I have a related question about irony. In that "textual" mode of doing STS, what became quite important was to say now that we have aestheticised science, now that we have successfully estranged ourselves from it, and now that we have found a way as social researchers to take science a lot less seriously than it demands, or rather to take it seriously in a different way, that we have done all that means that our mode of working is an ironic one. In Steve Woolgar's work that has been quite pronounced. But if I am right, irony is also quite important in your work, but it seems to be doing irony quite differently from the distancing-act informed kind of irony in early STS work. What are the forms of irony here, and what kind of work does the visual do in this respect? Because the

textual mode of being ironic can very quickly slip into a philosophical spiel that is about saying "This is not about essences, there are no foundations here, this is performative." So irony is quite a philosophical thing in a textual world, I think, even if it is also meant to show that lofty things do not necessarily go deep. But maybe when you do irony by visual means, it acquires a different force, and is interesting for different reasons?

LK: I find myself resisting the idea of irony. I definitely think of it as reflexivity and awareness of what work the stuff is doing, so that in the process of making some work, the final artefacts include some knowledge of where they are and what they are doing, and their history, and that people who are engaging with the final artefacts do come from somewhere. They don't come from the moon. They come from places where they see films, where they watch television, where they might see other art, they might read books, they might do all sorts of things. For me the successful objects acknowledge, in their material context, an awareness of what the viewer will bring.

NM: So does that mean that irony, which is about an awareness of a given practice being "performed," about being able to look beyond the practice, and see the limits and artificiality of the frames it deploys – or at least this is what I think irony has been about in STS – does it mean that that kind of irony is too self-absorbed? Are you saying that the gallery space simply does not tolerate that form of self-reflexivity, because it demands that you consider the audience's perspective, which here cannot possibly be ignored?

NW: It is something that Donna Haraway, amongst others, has pointed to – the problematics of the turn to the ironic which you mention is that there is a "suspicious line around what counts as practice". Many of the textual experiments, the ironic textual experiments of Steve Woolgar amongst others, are committed to a certain idea of representation. I am not sure they are committed to a more polluted performative mode as is found in some fine art practices. When you move to the visual, and in particular, when you move to the visual in the knowledge of the context of contemporary art and critical design, you do come up against the performative in a very, very different way, because of the resistances and possibilities of performance art, or installation work, or critical design. Critical design might prioritise things like ambiguity – an example is Bill Gaver et al's cultural probes. This is a huge shift from

an STS business as normal. And engaging in that practice puts you in a very different position to appropriating things like irony, than does, for example, a Woolgar text.

LK: And bound up with your description of irony, there is also wit. You know, part of the practice is the enjoyment of witty things – reading visually, understanding, digesting and then also contributing to the way that things are talked about.

NW: One of the things that keeps coming to mind is how, when you are part of some form of production related to exhibiting work in a setting like the business school, you feel particularly conscious of how an audience will find a way to engage with work. So if you start thinking about what are the ways into this work, you get to an interesting point of dialogue with all kinds of politics and the nature of aesthetic experience. And sometimes the wit comes through precisely that. You might play with an idea of the engagement with the work itself. Of course a writer might consider this as well, but the tricks of the trade are different.

LK: That is definitely part of contemporary art and design, particularly of the last 20–30 years, since the 60s.

NM: Yes, the wit of experiments. But on the point of experimentation, there does seem to be a distinct contribution of STS in contrast with the experiment in contemporary art. It struck me that a lot of the installations in this show have the form of experiments, they are about artists asking subjects to perform in a particular way, to act out a script, adopt a role that they probably wouldn't have adopted of their own accord, which is an important part of what social science experiments do. They challenge research subjects to do things that they would never do in their everyday life. But also I thought they were experiments in the sense that they seem to be seeking the sort of unexpected outcomes, sort of the generative force of experiments. Why do scientists do experiments? They want to generate newness, findings, new stuff, the unexpected. But I was thinking here we have experimental art, and we have STS talking about experiments somewhat along the lines that I just talked about it. Is it easy to bring those things together, or is it actually much harder to make those different traditions relevant to each other once you are seriously giving it a try? What is it about this show that it tries to bring those different traditions together?

NW: I think there is a clash of expectations about the nature of experiment between STS and contemporary art. Because in a way STS works with such an expanded notion of the experiment, that you might see some of the work here at the show as experimental or as involving the experiment, whereas I think some of the participants would see it as business as usual. So they might say "Well if that is an experiment, then all contemporary art practice is an experiment". Is that what STS is proposing? Whereas actually if we looked for artists who currently use experiments, you probably wouldn't come up with the people that are showing here. *Trials of Strength* does reference Simon Schaffer's writings on public experiments, a particular STS heritage. Schaffer says "Attention to the circumstances of their public experiment shows how reversals of force and trials of strength were used to demonstrate powers in nature, and to evince the powers of experimenters". So another question is how far are we evincing our own STS powers? That kind of connection with the experiment itself, and the history and philosophy of science to which it might be connected, that is not present in some of the other artists' contributions. They are working between ideas about art, and an idea of business. Bringing in the history and philosophy of science is not an inevitable move. So maybe these discourses that appear to cohere, actually, when you push them too closely together, seem strangely distant.

LK: If by experiment you mean "Let's do something, let's assemble some things and enact various practices, and we don't know what the result will be" – if that is an experiment, then I think artists and designers in their practices are experimenters because they don't know what the result will be. You have to go through a process of engaging with the material, whatever your material is, whether it is digital materials or paper, or working directly with an audience. You have to: you don't know what is going to come out. When I did *Pindices* with the sociologist Andrew Barry for the exhibition *Making Things Public* at ZKM, Andrew approached me and when we started off we had absolutely no clue at all what would emerge, not a clue. So we had to invent the process of working out how to get to something, as well as the something at the end. For me what distinguishes art and design practitioners from others, who maybe know the *form* of what they are going to get at the end, is an ability to go through some kind of process, working with materials directly, consciously and unconsciously, iteratively, and directly choosing to do so, working with multiple materialities, to get to a thing at the end.

They're very able to go through that process, and cope with the fact that they may have no idea, not just what the end result is, or even if the process to get there was right.

NM: What I find intriguing is the way in which experiments can be engaging. One way of thinking about social experiments is via Isabelle Stengers' writings about the Milgram experiment in social psychology, where she presents the social science experiment as something that must be seen on the level of disciplining. Here you get a rather militaristic account of experimentation where it is about the acting out of scripts that are meant to coerce a subject into certain behaviours, and then the question is "Is this subject going to be tough enough to resist this disciplining?" This seems to be the force field of the social experiment, as she describes it. But the *Physical Bar Charts* project seems to present a very different mode of doing a social experiment, where it is about seducing people, inviting them, drawing them in by their senses. Is this the distinctive feature of an aesthetically aware or a more aesthetically interested kind of experiment?

LK: In art and design practices, the artefacts are the point. When we did *Pindices*, there wasn't at the end some data that came from the badges being picked and taken away by people. We didn't even capture that data really. Yes, I have photos showing the levels of the badges in the tubes every week, a visual record, but I don't have numbers of badges taken, we haven't produced any graphs, we haven't written a paper saying "And this proves that for the audience from ZKM over five months, these were the top badges." I was interested, but not *so* interested. The point was the artefact we made – the badges, the tubes. It didn't want or need to go any further, and that is a different between art and design practice and the social sciences. You make a thing, you don't have to write a text as well, where you then describe what you did (unless you want to). It is its own argument.

NW: In a way, the thermometers hung from balloons – what they add to that kind of moment of recognition that you are being enrolled, is also a recognition that you are being enrolled in an aesthetic sense in looking at a balloon, a blue balloon. It does not fade into the background, it is very present. You have to take on board in some way, even if it is ignoring it, your relationship to something which is highly commoditised and highly symbolic and is also performing a function, it is literally, with the help of

the helium, holding up a thermometer. It is not just there to be pretty, even though you have to encounter it as something that has a visual presence which might be considered decorative. And so I think the other disciplining that goes on is around this notion of the aesthetic encounter and how, to a certain extent, we really don't think enough about that kind of aspect of STS work, in any deep way.

NM: But the wit and the play do seem to be quite important.

NW: But that is the way in. In *Untitled (This is the beginning of the Presidential Plenary…)*, made to accompany the Society for the Social Studies of Science (4S) conference in Montreal last year, I tried to pull in the audience through directly referencing the metaphors of STS: the dog, the lead, the cat's cradle. In a way it was rather unambiguous. It asked, "Do you remember the cat's cradle? Now you are being invited to *do* the cat's cradle?" Most artists wouldn't be so heavy handed with their references, but in order to get through that either resistance or silencing of that encounter within STS, I felt that that was my best chance of drawing people in. And that is why I think this notion of thinking about the engagement or interference is so crucial for this type of whatever we call we are doing, like the badges. There is a way in through the aesthetic of the tubes, there is a way in through getting the badge and there is a way in when you are encountering both of those, when you have to decide what to do.

NM: I think you are describing very well the challenge and risk of doing an experiment in the mode that you have chosen. One thing that keeps bugging me is that for experiments in science, there is this sense that it ultimately has to generate a "finding" and if it doesn't do that, it is either a failure or a fake. Harry Collins wrote about a public demonstration where they deliberately crashed a train to prove to the public that trains are a safe way of transporting nuclear waste, that there was no leakage. Collins then made a point out of proving that this wasn't a real experiment, it was merely a performance, a mere show, which didn't conclusively affirm or refute a factual claim… If you come from that sort of critical approach to experiments, don't you think you are very likely to say that experiments in art are not really experiments? Or is there a sense in which art can help to make it clear that different types of experiments demand or deserve different criteria of success?

LK: In your description you said Collins was saying it was merely a performance as if that was a negative thing. But to me a good performance – having been involved in live art and theatre – a good performance is one where you don't know what the result is. Even if it is scripted, the same script as the one you did yesterday, the same choreography as the one you practiced, you still don't know what is going to happen and that audience, that evening, doesn't know what is going to happen. The liveness matters.

NM: So it being a performance is not a mark of a bad experiment, that's what you are saying. It is the unexpected, the riskiness of the performance.

LK: Yes, on the contrary, to call something a good performance, I would say is an accolade.

NW: And one of the things I was trying to create in *Here Comes Experience!* – the audio installation by the noticeboard in the business school – is something which sits right on that edge of being visible and invisible. It exists in a place that although it is for communication, it is often overlooked. So I am reversing the strategy that I used in the 4S. People may either miss it or encounter it first as a peripheral experience. So that may constantly be just a failed experiment, but I am hoping what its potential failure will do, is point to the potential failure of the visual modelling being describing, first in English and then in Mandarin. There is a certain impossibility of some of these descriptions ever working, as a set of clear instructions, for example, from which one could model experience. But that is not a failure in itself.

NM: I have one last question, about the visual. In philosophy and social studies, there is a particular narrative about the visual that associates it with emancipation, and progress in human thought. John Dewey's work, for instance, says that we are enslaved by the cognitive and the textual, and here the challenge is to make the shift to an embodied form of intelligence, where we think as living, breathing creatures, and part of that move is also the move to make space for the visual as a mode of representing, and of communicating. The visual here figures as the endpoint of an upbeat, progressive narrative of liberation. But in the business context other narratives about the visual are relevant: the visual as something that is more engaging than the textual, as we already mentioned, but also the visual as a stronger proposition, a stronger

mode of asserting things. And so, I was wondering, what happens if you take the narratives about the visual as some kind of emancipation from the textual, into the business environment? Is that tricky?

NW: I think one issue with the business environment, for example in relation to design, is that it already has personas and visual experience models, and its own set of visual forms that operate. Some parts of business are already doing so much visual work quite close to some proposals in the show that is it very difficult to know how to be there at all. That is not true of everywhere, but when you have design firms who employ art graduates and ex-students of performance studies and so on, how would you not expect to have that already in there? In my interviews with designers there is often a hopeful rhetoric around the visual, which may try to escape other pressures. For example the designer who was trying to produce a persona whose "race" is unstable or ambiguous.

NM: So you are saying "This is happening." So it is not a question of do you want it to happen. It is how you engage with it.

LK: There are management disciplines which are already highly attentive to the visual such as marketing, branding, and some researchers in organisation studies. What I think is interesting about this workshop and the conversations around it is that STS people have learnt something from looking at science where they perhaps weren't expecting to pay attention to visual things. Now, we know some businesses, some organisations, are highly savvy about using marketing and communications theory to pay attention at the very least to their logos and how they make themselves public, externally and possibly internally. I think STS will uncover something about the way organisations go about performing and using the visual. That is what I am hoping for from the workshop. But I think what we are trying to add with the exhibition is to pay attention to the ways that these artists and design practitioners are already making comments about this. The artists are showing us something about what organisations are doing, and the designers are implicated in helping them do it. They are both reflexive about the operations of the visual and the performances that go on in organising. I think they already know this stuff, whatever they are reading, and partly that's because that's what you get taught in the atelier model of art and design school. In a way the practitioners know

something and can tell us something in their work: the STS people could catch up.

NW: And what is so interesting is how that catching up happens. So you can catch up via imitation, you can catch up via re-enactment, or you can catch up and intervene in that catching up. I suppose the hope is that STS, by taking on board something that isn't really representation, isn't really illustrative, is that something else can be done with that, theoretically, practically. But I don't fully know what that would be.

LK: And that would be the experiment. We don't know what on earth it will end up in, and we certainly don't know how to get there, and that would be the experiment.

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