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A Musical Interpretation Of The 'Hard Data' Of Our Lives On Exhibit At Wesleyan

By Michael Hamad

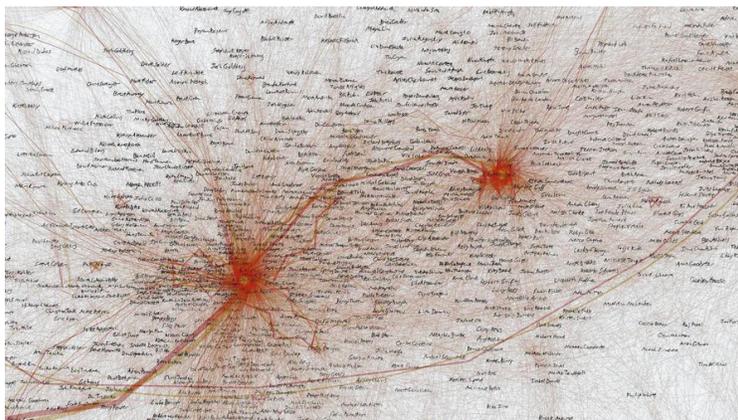
A musical score of "Hard Data," visual artist and composer R. Luke Dubois' six-movement composition for amplified string quartet, currently hangs on the wall at Wesleyan University's Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery through Dec. 13. The exhibit includes an interactive website, video and open-source score that marks the process by which people and their behaviors are reduced to numbers.

Once, during the U.S. invasion of Iraq that began in 2003, NYC-based visual artist and composer R. Luke Dubois found himself watching CNN. At the bottom of the screen, a news crawl displayed the rising casualty count. Dubois had an epiphany. "Not only did I not know anybody who was affected by this," Dubois says, "I didn't know anybody who even knew anybody who was affected by this."

Dubois was wrong: He knew three people who were fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. But his older brother had lost seven high school classmates in Vietnam. Americans, Dubois realized, now have more data about war than real-world experience.

A musical score of "Hard Data," Dubois' six-movement composition for amplified string quartet, currently hangs on the wall at Wesleyan University's Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery. It's part of "R. Luke Dubois: In Real Time," an exhibit that runs through Dec. 13. "Hard Data" (there's also an interactive website, video and open-source score) acknowledges the sad process by which people — soldiers, innocent civilians, men, women and children — are reduced to numbers.

"More of us know the numbers about [the war in Iraq] than actually knew anyone fighting in it," Dubois says. "That's a really dangerous Rubicon to cross." Dubois compiled data on casualties of the Iraq War from the Brookings Institution, the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, The New York Times and other sources.



R. Luke DuBois, Self-portrait

R. Luke DuBois, Self-portrait, 1993-2014 (2014, inkjet on paper, index, 60 x 60 inches. (Courtesy of the Artist/Bitforms Gallery)

He sonified it across six subtitled movements: “men,” “children,” “soldiers,” “refugees,” “women” and “missing.” Each measure of the piece represents a single month of war: If 12 people died, the quartet plays 12 (or a factor of 12) notes. Each movement is written in the style of a wartime composer: Igor Stravinsky, George Crumb, Olivier Messiaen, Iannis Xenakis and so on. He derived pitch content from “Mawtini,” the current national anthem of Iraq, a setting of Palestinian poet Ibrahim Touqan’s poem by Mohammad Flaifel.

“The arc of the music tracks the arc of the conflict,” Dubois says. “Music is really a great way to get emotion back into data.”

A follow-up piece, “Hard Data Redux,” which uses data from a Guardian article about mass shootings in the U.S., will be performed in the gallery on Friday, Nov. 20, at 8 p.m. Admission is free.

“It’s almost two a week, or something like that,” Dubois says. “We’re totally numb to it. It shows up as charts and graphs. They don’t show up as people, and that’s the problem.”

A consonant, enveloping sound greets visitors to the Zilkha Gallery, where various works show Dubois’ interests in mining data and merging music and the visual arts. In “NYC Musicians,” seven video screens, each with a dedicated audio speaker, stretch across a single wall, showing slow-motion footage of Dubois’ friends: cellist (and Wesleyan faculty member) Alex Waterman, electric bassist Melvin Gibbs, flutist Natacha Diels, guitarist Elliott Sharp, vocalist and percussion player Bora Yoon, violinist Todd Reynolds and trombonist Chris McIntyre.

Dubois shot footage of each musician improvising (separately, but everyone in the same key) for six minutes, at 240 frames per second; the footage plays back at 1/10 speed, with time-stretched audio. Cello strings vibrate. Ghostly, stretched-out flute sounds mingle with wind chimes.

“Taking a photograph of a musician always seemed weird to me,” Dubois says. “It robs them of the degree of freedom they have with sound and time. You need time to do sound.”

Dubois’ “A Year in MP3s” compiles 365 works, written one per day in 2009, onto iPods available at the front desk. You can shuffle through them, and also view computer-generated sonograms of each piece.



“A Year in MP3s”

R. Luke Dubois’s sonograms from “A Year in MP3s” at Wesleyan’s Zilkha Gallery in Middletown.
(Sandy Aldieri/Perceptions Photography)

Adjacent to the “Hard Data” score are two large “Self Portraits” — data visualizations on paper, representing Dubois’ email relationships and Facebook friends. “The point was to show that we emit a lot

of data, and we don't really think too much about how it's used," Dubois says.

"Hindsight is Always 20/20," originally commissioned for the 2008 Democratic National Convention, offers one eye chart, the kind you'd see during a visit to the optometrist, for each State of the Union address. Words — "unemployment" (Herbert Hoover), "Soviet" (Harry Truman), "terror" (George W. Bush), and so on — are given greater size and placement toward the top according to how often they appear in each speech.

"A More Perfect Union," originally exhibited in 2011 at the Ringling Museum in Sarasota, Fla., replaces city names on a series of U.S. maps with the most common words mined from 19 million online dating-site profiles. You could spend hours trying to figure out why, say, "dinosaur" was the top word in Syracuse, N.Y. (Dinosaur BBQ is a popular restaurant in Syracuse.)

The most common dating-site word in Hartford? "Courant."

"A lot of the No. 1 words are newspapers," Dubois says. "A lot of them are restaurants. The No. 1 word in New York City is 'now,' as in, 'Now I'm working as a waiter.' It all kind of makes sense."

"R. LUKE DUBOIS: IN REAL TIME" runs through Dec. 13 at the Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery at Wesleyan University in Middletown. "Hard Data Redux" takes place on Friday, Nov. 20, at 8 p.m. Tickets are free. Information: wesleyan.edu.