

Portland Press Herald

Art review: In 'Now,' technological prowess poses human questions
R. Luke DuBois' work is on display at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art through Sept. 4.

BY DANIEL KANY

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN / 1861-1865

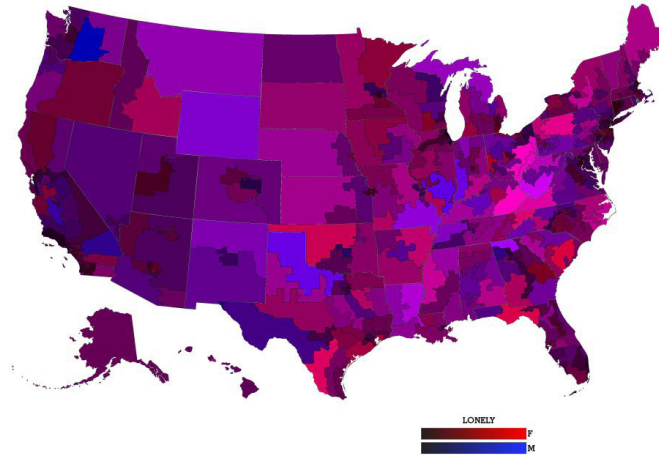
"Now" features about 20 sets of slickly presented conceptual works based on data-mining. Some are based on simple, accessible gestures, such as "Billboard" (2005), in which each of the top songs on the Billboard Hot 100 list from 1958 to 2000 is played for one second for each week it topped the charts. The 37-minute piece, however, doesn't use the actual recordings but rather a "spectral average" – a buzzing hum intended to convey information such as the key and register of each song – so the experience feels less about what you hear in the headphones than the stream of song titles that flash on the screen of the wall-mounted iPod.

A similar piece that condenses Academy Award-winning films to one minute each is more broadly successful, because enough of the film is included to follow the action of the notable films, plus the length, at 75 minutes, neatly matches the duration of a feature film.

While these two pieces represent the simplest route of DuBois' work, they bookend the range of his success.

DuBois's data-mining approach produces widely varying final products. Because they can be grasped instantaneously, DuBois's image-based works tend to succeed, while the works that take music outside of typical duration lose their ability to convey much other than tone and texture. Not surprisingly, two of the most engaging works feature photos of the faces of pop singer Britney Spears and then Playboy models that flash in quick succession, all with their eyes aligned in the same spots. These works succeed not because of the attractiveness of the models but rather because of the direct eye contact with the viewer, a warm-blooded humanistic element too often missing from DuBois's tech-tinted work. The work next to the Playboy piece, for example, is a large print of DuBois' 5,000 Facebook contacts presented as a gravitational cluster model with gravity density indicating interconnectedness.

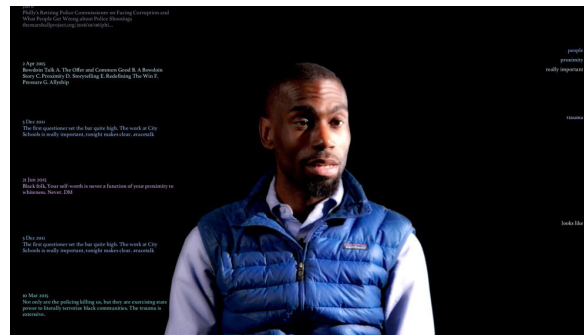
While the Facebook piece is a “self-portrait,” it falls short on visual appeal, instead relying on the grandeur of its technical accomplishment. Whether it succeeds largely depends on your response to the digital sublime – the sublime being what philosophers like Edmund Burke described as a perception so overwhelmingly vast that it is beyond our ability to fully calculate or comprehend. “Now” targets several things that are beyond us, including both the data and the cutting-edge technologies used to capture and manipulate them.



“A More Perfect Union: Lonely,” pigment-ink on photo rag

In works like “A More Perfect Union,” in which DuBois retitled the United States according to the most common words used in 16.7 million online dating profiles he downloaded, the data are understandable but the technological craft overwhelms us: “How did he do that?” The idea of a person taking and using such personal data for his own purposes raises a number of questions, some of which are frightening or creepy.

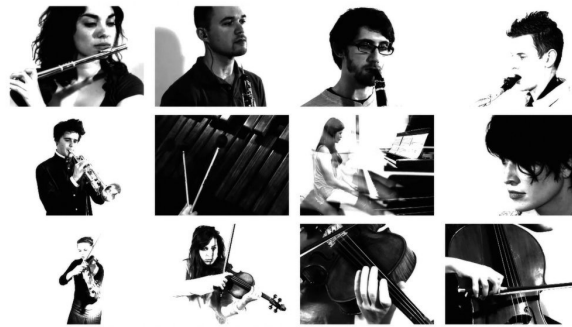
In a work commissioned for the National Portrait Gallery, DuBois’ portrait of the founders of Google, Sergey Brin and Larry Page (2013), harvests YouTube video of them in real time on one screen and, on a second screen, displays a real-time data constellation produced by the secret algorithm that drives the search engine.



“32 Questions for DeRay Mckesson,” generative digital media work on computer, with custom software

The local connection is DuBois’ portrait of Bowdoin alum and civil rights activist DeRay Mckesson, a leading figure in the Black Lives Matter movement. The portrait features a filmed interview of Mckesson answering 32 questions provided by Bowdoin students. On the left of the video is a Twitter feed that posts relevant quotes from Mckesson’s more than 150,000 tweets.

DuBois, who gave a TED talk in February, co-directs the Integrated Digital Media program at the New York University Tandon School of Engineering and is represented by bitforms gallery in Manhattan's Lower East Side. DuBois is variously described as a composer, computer programmer, filmmaker or new media artist. The composer element of his biography is well on view in "Now," but the work feels less about music than conceptual sound art. One film replays a performance of a 4½-minute piece of chamber music intentionally written for one-tenth speed: The result is a 45-minute film featuring ambient sounds few will recognize as music.



BELOW: "Vertical Music (for twelve musicians filmed at high speed)," HD video, black and white, stereo sound
"Vertical Music (for twelve musicians filmed at high speed)," HD video, black and white, stereo sound

DuBois' film chops are clearer: His row of super-slow motion videos of performing musicians is gorgeous, and his film of performance artist Lian Amaris prepping for a date in slow-motion over 72 hours in a Manhattan traffic circle that has been sped up to create a 63-minute film is unquestionably successful. But there is a question: Does the success belong to Amaris or DuBois? It's one thing to direct and film an actor, but the art of these pieces is akin to taking a photograph of a painting by a different artist.

DuBois, however, doesn't answer such questions, and it's clear he doesn't want to. His project is data rather than conclusive analysis. How you feel about that is up to you. Many believe that authentic content requires artists to take a stand when it comes to the ideas they present. Consider, for example, the difference between someone shouting out common political words as opposed to a reasoned political debate.

DuBois's best work is "Hindsight is Always 20/20," commissioned for the 2008 Democratic National Convention. The huge suite of eye-chartlike letterpress prints gather and prioritize the words used by each president during his inaugural speech. These fascinating lexicons are powerful vehicles: While Buchanan's top word was "slavery," Lincoln's was "emancipation." Clinton led with "21st" and Bush followed with "terror."

Despite his lexicon neutrality, DuBois handles political discourse with an internal sizzle: A two-screen piece matches the acceptance speeches of Obama and Romney, honing in on the fact that 85 percent of the words they used were the same. DuBois alternately shifts one video to match the words of the other (a perfect use of the stereo aspect of the headphones).

The result is startling. I found myself transfixed and asking question after question.