AD

Inside the Cooper Hewitt's Installation at the London Design Biennale

by Alice Bucknell

"How do we best represent the United States at this current political moment?" Ellen Lupton recalls asking herself when she took on precisely that task for the 2018 London Design Biennale. As the senior curator of contemporary design at Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, which is representing the U.S. at the Biennale for the second year running, Lupton is no stranger to the dark side of design. Selecting the contentious topic of facial recognition software in line with this year's broader theme of Emotional States, Lupton spotlights one of the most critical but shadowy inventions of the digital era.

The resulting installation, dubbed "Face Values," is a high-tech investigation into the ways that human faces and expressed emotions have become a latent source of capital for both governments and corporations within the data economy. Featuring immersive installations by Zachary Lieberman and R. Luke DuBois—two designers and educators from New York—as well as the emerging data exhibition design specialists, Matter Architecture Practice, "Face Values" digs into the social, racial, economic, and aesthetic implications of facial recognition.

Throughout the duration of the London Design Biennale, "Face Values" will present its audience with the pleasures and pitfalls of the technology, exposing the full spectrum and scale of its influence. Lieberman's installation behaves as an emotional exquisite corpse, enabling visitors to collage together their separate expressions into a new combined portrait. "Lieberman's contribution is more poetic, contemplative, and freaky-trippy," confirms Lupton.

woman screaming next to photo of strange face
A visitor interacts with Zachary Lieberman's Expression Mirror in the "Face Values" installation.
Photo: David Levene

Meanwhile, the installation by DuBois offers a more straightforward and politically charged conversation between visitors and a computer, which harvests emotional data from its users in real time. The pressurized power relationship between human and computer is made more pronounced as visitors are left at the mercy of the computer's algorithmic analysis of their expressions—which, as DuBois reveals, is often wrong. This inaccuracy has dark implications far beyond the biennale, as all these computing systems around the world (and their human agents) rely on the same technology. "When you get it wrong, the consequence is people's lives," cautions Lupton.

Matter Architecture Practice has created an artificial garden of reeds to serve as visual adhesive for Lieberman and DuBois's installations. It is a surreal splicing of nature and technology that suggests a surprisingly intrinsic side to facial recognition; that the desire surrounding "reading" emotions burrows deep into human history and across culture. "There's a misconception that facial recognition is a new, cutting-edge thing, but the truth is human history is filled with attempts to qualify emotions and extrapolating them as readings of character," explains Lupton. "And this stems into pseudoscientific approaches which have fed into the racial and aesthetic biases of this software today."

woman looking at screens on gallery wall
A visitor interacts with the exhibition, which spans various media.
Photo: David Levene

To underscore this idea, "Face Values" is accompanied by a visual essay produced by the designer and historian Jessica Helfand that collages the separate efforts by scientists, criminologists, and beauty experts to glean concrete data from the human face. In her piece, Helfand outlines the means of quantifying facial measures, as well as the aesthetic references of phrenologists and craniologists—both practioners of pseudosciences that attempt to qualify a patient's character from the shape and proportions of her skull.

"The U.S. is having its biggest, scariest, most disruptive impact in technology and surveillance culture; showing handmade furniture from Brooklyn wouldn't quite cut it," says Lupton. Expanding beyond the latest textile-weaving technique, drone-crafted design object, or hottest new sustainable material, "Face Values" sinks its teeth into a topic of global concern. While the exhibition would have benefited from a critical perspective that extends beyond the intellectual circle of New York that considers how other areas of the country are responding to the presence of facial recognition software, the ubiquitous technology is increasingly embedded in global flows of capital and bodies. Unlike the superficial passing fads that tend to typify design fairs, "Face Values" is a fascinating vision into the history and technology of a digital design tool that is not going away anytime soon.