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Data (after)Lives at the University of Pittsburgh

A Constellations Exhibition in the
University Art Gallery

Alison Langmead and Paulina Pardo Gaviria

Abstract

This brief essay presents the exhibition *Data (after)Lives*, which was held in the University Art Gallery at the University of Pittsburgh from September 8 to October 14, 2016. This show was the culmination of a year's work between the Department of History of Art and Architecture (HAA) and several outside collaborators. It was produced within the Constellations model of research and teaching that is fundamental to the workings of the HAA department as well as to the Visual Media Workshop, the digital humanities lab directed by Alison Langmead (<https://haa.pitt.edu/visual-media-workshop>), the lead curator of *Data (after)Lives*. This essay gathers together a few texts produced for the exhibition and presents the experience of working on the show, which was produced by an exceptional group of people, all of whom brought fantastic insight and energy to the project. The online exhibition of *Data (after)Lives: The Persistence of Encoded Identity* is currently on view at the University Art Gallery website (<http://uaq.pitt.edu>).

About the Authors

Dr. Alison Langmead is the Director of the Visual Media Workshop (VMW) in the Department of History of Art and Architecture and Associate Professor in the School of Computing and Information. The mission of the VMW is to develop and encourage the creation of innovative methods for producing, disseminating, and preserving academic work using digital technologies as a fundamental component of the scholarly toolkit.

Paulina Pardo Gaviria is a PhD candidate in the University of Pittsburgh's History of Art and Architecture department specializing in art from Latin America. Examining the development of contemporary art from Brazil, her dissertation project is the first monographic approach to the work of Brazilian artist Leticia Parente (1930-1991).

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Lead Curator's Statement

The ideas for *Data (after)Lives* grew out of—and well beyond—conversations surrounding the Visual Media Workshop's Digital Humanities project *Decomposing Bodies* (<http://sites.haa.pitt.edu/db>). *Decomposing Bodies* focuses on the records of the Bertillon system of measurement, a French police protocol used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in, among other places around the world, the Ohio Penitentiary and the Ohio State Reformatory. For this project, the team digitized

over 12,500 Bertillon cards from these local American collections, and is working to transcribe the measurement data both manually, using labor here at the University of Pittsburgh, and automatically, with the help of the national supercomputing infrastructure. Faculty and students alike are considering the implications of this use of *Bertillonage* in Ohio, as well as using the information on the cards to delve into the lives and crimes of the men and women represented by the system.


It was during one of many productive brainstorming sessions focused on the possible outputs of this work that the notion of creating an exhibition was brought to the table. The fascinating ways that the brute materiality of *Bertillonage* intersected with its systematic, abstract data management principles ended up being the core principle behind the creation of *Data (after)Lives*.

Once the idea of the exhibition was settled, and we had secured a spot on the University Art Gallery's schedule, Josh Ellenbogen and myself, the two lead faculty members for *Decomposing Bodies*, quickly reached out to Richard Pell, Director of the Center for PostNatural History and associate professor at the School of Art, Carnegie Mellon University. We had known Rich from previous interactions in the Department of History of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh, and felt that his research interests would productively intersect with the ideas at the heart of this new show, and Rich kindly agreed to join in. He brought us an expanded view of what we could do with our core notion that humans create externalized data about our identities that is then applied back onto our lives to control our behavior. Adding objects of his own from the American Eugenics Archive, as well as pieces from his colleagues and collaborators, Rich transformed what began as a focused piece on historical materialism into a much broader, expansive universe of ideas.

Paulina Pardo Gaviria, a scholar who is currently a PhD student in the Department of History of Art and Architecture, generously offered her time to attend the initial meetings for *Data (after)Lives*, which were hosted by the department's Visual Knowledge Constellations working group. She quickly found that the material she was preparing on Letícia Parente for her comprehensive examinations perfectly suited the themes and concepts behind the show. After she presented her material to the *Data (after)Lives* group, we could not have been more in alignment with her assessment, and happily agreed to her participation in the show. In a fantastic display of support, her graduate advisors allowed her work on the exhibition to serve in partial fulfillment of her comprehensive exams. With Paulina's inclusion, the curatorial team was assembled, and the show—with a great deal of additional assistance from numerous talented individuals—was produced.

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Examined JUL - 7 1916
By B. J. Bates

Figure 1

Bertillon Card for John R. Seymour, Inmate No. 6596, 1916, National Archives Atlanta (Series: Inmate Case Files, 1902 – 1921, Record Group 129: Records of the Bureau of Prisons, 1870 – 2009, Identifier: 646361).

Introductory Text from the Exhibition

Material technologies such as DNA testing, computerized facial recognition, fingerprint matching, government-issued photo identification practices, and aptitude tests have long established a data-driven landscape onto which humans have inscribed notions of identity. While each of these technical procedures is generally tailor-made to accomplish something highly specific, the information that they bring into being can often enjoy a “data afterlife,” one that extends, interrogates, or even betrays its original context and function.

Data (after)Lives investigates the relationship between human perceptions of the self and these tangible procedures that produce alternative, externalized, and malleable representations of the human experience. It illuminates how sometimes humble material practices can create convincing narratives that define a framework within which we produce theories and assumptions about the workings of our world.

The diversity of objects found in the show testify to the impressive variety of technologies that have been used in modern history to create and augment notions of human identity. At times, as in the case of traditional portrait painting and the physiognotrace, the procedures strive to individuate by directly recording a person’s appearance, thus producing an artifact that matches how we visually perceive our fellow human beings. At other times, as in the case of Alphonse Bertillon’s nineteenth-century system of anthropometry and current-day computerized facial recognition, the technique might *seem* to take its force from creating artifacts that match everyday reality, but instead does something quite different—it replaces the original, perceptual object with a numerical or digital counterpart that can be more easily stored and manipulated. In still other cases, any pretense to a match with a perceptual original vanishes, and we confront techniques whose data appear to be independent of anything we see in everyday reality—as in the case of visualizing our DNA.

All of these practices and technologies can be used by governmental or private institutional entities to study or manage populations—quite literally so in the case of eugenics and its techniques for asserting identity—or they can be repurposed by artists to interrogate their function. A number of artists found in this show, from Heather Dewey-Hagborg to Paul Vanouse to Letícia Parente, have sought to examine and even undercut the smooth application of identity procedures such as those surveyed by *Data (after)Lives*.



Figure 2
Installation view of *Data (after)Lives* with *Landscapes of Human Identity* in the University of Pittsburgh Art Gallery, Pittsburgh, 2016. Photo by Lily Brewer.



Figure 3
Installation view of *Data (after)Lives* with reconstruction of the Bertillon machine, Bertillon cards, and artistic interpretations of Bertillonage by Aaron Henderson, Alison Langmead, and Sam Nosenzo, 2016. Photo by Lily Brewer.

Recreating Letícia Parente's *Medida*: A Graduate Student's Perspective of *Data (after)Lives*

Early on, the main concept of the exhibition of the Visual Knowledge Constellation working group resonated with the subject of my doctoral research—the *oeuvre* of Brazilian artist Letícia Parente (1930–1991). At the heart of *Data (after)Lives* was Bertillonage and, within it, a replica of the Bertillon Measurement Apparatus [Fig. 3]. Echoing its guiding principle, I recreated Parente's installation *Medida* (*Measurement*, 1976) grounded in the notion that data collection has a long-lasting impact on shaping individual identity. At first glance, Alphonse Bertillon's police protocol developed in the 1890s in France, and Letícia Parente's artwork from mid-1970s Brazil may not seem convergent histories. However, the application of Bertillonage at the Ohio Penitentiary and the Ohio State Reformatory as presented in *Data (after)Lives* brought to light the ways in which artistic modes of display used by Parente in *Medida* pointed to governmental means of control at a time when her country was under military dictatorship.

Medida is an art installation containing several tools with which to measure a person's body, believed to determine his/her identity. By recreating individual data collection processes and encouraging the audience to be critical of those processes, *Medida* questions the objective accuracy of any given measurement as well as the use of personal data in contemporary life.



Figure 4

Installation view of *Data (after)Lives* with Letícia Parente, *Medida*. Reconstruction at the University of Pittsburgh Art Gallery, Pittsburgh, 2016 of the exhibition at the Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, 1976. Courtesy of André Parente. Photo by Paulina Pardo Gáviria.

The installation is divided into two parts; the first devoted to gathering data from the audience, while the second illustrates startling, even preternatural body measurements featured in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. Eight stations divide up this first section, where sets of instructions and tools are provided to gallery visitors to measure traits such as facial shape, respiratory capacity, blood type, visual acuity, and taste, to name a few. Together, the instructions, tools, and analog databases, which take the form of notebooks filled in by exhibition visitors, evidence the imprecision underlining the measurement of human identities, as well as the controlled situations designed for individual data gathering and further use.

Medida's third station, Station C, for example, records individual identity by delimiting the sensitivity of the body. In this station, participants are directed to measure their pain resistance by testing the sensitivity of their skin with a seven-arm chandelier and provided matches. Here, they are instructed to first light all seven candles, keep track of passing time aided by the installation audio that announces every five seconds, and, with two fingers, start snuffing out candle after candle. Once they can no longer stand the pain caused to their fingers, they are asked to record the number of extinguished candles, multiply it by ten, and

divide this number by the seconds passed. The resulting number (3.75, according to the example on the instructions sheet) determines one's resistance to pain. Experiencing *Medida* as part of *Data (after)Lives* invites visitors to ask what this number reveals about one's identity. Moreover, it induces one to ask why one would need to know, with a precise number, one's physical resistance to pain.



Figure 5

Letícia Parente, *Medida (Station C)*. Reconstruction at the University of Pittsburgh Art Gallery, Pittsburgh, 2016 of the exhibition at the Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, 1976. Courtesy of André Parente. Photo by Rae Di Cicco.

With instructions on how to inflict pain upon the body and provide tools to do so, it is important to consider the political context of Brazil in the mid-1970s. Although neither mentioned in Parente's installation nor discussed in the public sphere at the time, the exercise of physical torture in the hands of the state was a common practice under the dictatorship in Brazil (1964–1985). Violent practices were well known to many in the country but only discussed in the private realm. In Station C, Parente uses domestic items—candles, chandelier, and matches—as a strategy to address a contemporary political situation touching directly on civil rights aggressively violated by Brazil's military government (especially through the 1968 decree Institutional Act N.5), while simply presenting them as an experimental work of art that mixed aesthetics appearances and scientific procedures. *Medida*, as Station C demonstrates, sets the stage for the individual yet public recording of the limits of one's own body. This installation does so as an artistic strategy to provoke a critical reflection on the significance of translating individuals into commensurable, quantitative, and collectible data. Unlike the practical application of Bertillonage, the data gathered in *Medida* are not intended for further use, thus reinforcing the artistic qualities of Parente's installation, as well as its intellectual contributions.

In 1976, *Medida* was presented as one room-sized installation and the unique work in Parente's solo homonymous exhibition at the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro. For

its iteration at the University of Pittsburgh Art Gallery, we decided to faithfully recreate *Medida* as it was displayed forty years ago, thus maintaining the unity and complexity of the original work, following recent curatorial models for Conceptual art, of which the most prominent is *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013* (Fondazione Prada, Venice, 2013).¹ To recreate *Medida* in 2016 and include it in *Data (after)Lives*, I conducted in-depth archival research in Brazil to determine the installation's original layout, Parente's designs for her original measuring tools, and the specific aesthetics of the room, among other characteristics of the work. During the months leading up to the installation of *Data (after)Lives*, I undertook research at the Museu de Arte Moderna's exhibition archives and interviewed Parente's sons and daughters, who were not only present at the 1976 exhibition but also collaborated with the artist in the construction and manipulation of some of the exhibited measuring tools. During my time in Brazil, I also gathered objects to recreate each station of *Medida*, such as measuring tapes and notebooks like those used by Parente and still available at Brazilian stores.

In Pittsburgh, close collaboration with Isabelle Chartier, Curator of the University Art Gallery, brought to fruition the plans envisaged for *Medida*'s recreation. Overcoming practical challenges, such as turning all the white walls of the room black without painting them, the installation process transformed one of the gallery's rooms in a matter of weeks, bringing to Pittsburgh what once was an installation of experimental art in the third floor of the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro. As a result, (re)contextualizing *Medida* within *Data (after)Lives*—as opposed to presenting it in a solo show—evidenced the historical and cross-geographical relevance of data-gathering processes intended to visualize individual identities. Through the measuring experiences presented to exhibition visitors, this unique perspective also engaged participants in methodological data management principles and forms of control present both in Parente's *Medida* and in Bertillon's system as applied in the United States. In doing so, they experienced different visual strategies that have been used to determine one's identity and regulate a person's behavior, pointing to a global range of specific historical situations.

Without the collaboration of scholars at the University of Pittsburgh's History of Art and Architecture Constellations model, curatorial projects such as *Data (after)Lives* and, within it, *Medida*, would never have opened its doors to the public.

Paulina Pardo Gaviria

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¹ See Germano Celant, ed., *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013* (Milan: Fondazione Prada, Ca' Corner della Regina, 2013), exhibition catalogue; and Germano Celant in conversation with Terry Smith in Terry Smith, *Talking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012).