

Shattered Calculations

FRANCES DYSON

I was scared to death / I could have died of joy begins with an oscillation. Before the viewer even enters the gallery, he or she must confront the strange parallax of its title. Catastrophic fear and joy meet in the 11 words that name this exhibition, divided only by a thin slash – a slight interruption in what could be a continuum between a fear and a joy that happens to culminate in death. The typographical slash that unites these emotional extremities is materialized in the space of the gallery. As the viewer enters, they notice two large glass tubes placed on stainless steel tables at opposite ends of the gallery. Each tube encloses a delicate, glass model of the right and left lobes of a brain with a trailing ‘spinal column’ that tapers to an ambiguous, reptilian tail. The glass tubes are filled with a gas that, when excited by electrons, produces ringed columns of plasma: one white-mauve, the other maroon/red. When touched, the columns of light glow and pulse: one arcs as if responding to the viewer’s hand; while the other, ringed like a translucent larva, flashes more insistently.

The rhythmic pulsing of the brains is neither random nor accidental. According to Richards, both represent the patterns of brain activity that neurotheologians and increasingly some neuroscientist’s¹ claim will produce a feeling of benign enlightenment – of being occupied by a god-like presence, or trigger the abject fear of being possessed by a demonic presence. As the mauve-white brain surges enlightenment and the maroon/red brain flashes terror, one would imagine both ‘creatures’ to be fully occupied with their own private out of body experiences. But while both evoke the emotional sense (or neurobiological profile) of being haunted, the actual, material presence of an other is provided by the viewer, who, by touching the glass tubes, becomes part of an electrical circuit, literally grounding the work as they themselves are literally and figuratively, grounded by the gallery.

It is on this solid ground, and via this bodily presence, that the viewer is able to experience the fractures – both emotional and intellectual - created by the piece. The glowing, pulsing brains seem to be alive: they move, they respond to touch and in the darkened space of the gallery they appear to be communicating. At the same time the clean, precise, stainless steel

surfaces of their environment, and the odd mix of intricately glass blown anatomical models encased in sharp, oversized test tubes, suggests the possibility – recently made infamous by the litigiously inclined offspring of cryogenically preserved baseball players – that these brains are models of future human life. There are countless scenarios of consciousness disembodied, or more recently, downloaded.² Collectively they influence current research in telepresence technologies and artificial life; they contribute to futuristic visions of intelligent machines that are distributed, responsive to the environment and ‘embodied’, and they induce a dystopic mix of repulsion and awe that the prospect of life reduced (by necessity or malevolence) to a functioning brain and stem. However with its finely crafted glass, interior fluorescence, and otherworldly plasmic pulsing, *I was scared to death / I could have died of joy* re-composes a more mystical vision: the beauty, simplicity and elegance of human consciousness unfettered by the paraphernalia of flesh, communicating the highest joys, the deepest fears, the full spectrum of emotional existence via the perfect medium: a light emanating from within that both embodies and transmits unfathomable experience in a mathematically precise manner, communicating across a darkened space through a transparent medium to other ‘like minds’.

The possibility of representing affect as a series of pulses conforming to particular quantifiable patterns is no longer speculative. As cognitive and computer sciences blend with the IT industry, new technologies for data mining, affective computing and body-mapping are being deployed across a range of contexts: choosing team leaders through conversation analysis, spotting terrorists using biometrics, or re-uniting couples lost to the virtual office through ‘cell phone therapy’. While these seemingly divergent contexts and research interests are guided to some extent by military and/or commercial objectives, they also share a common belief in the computability of emotions. All that stands between abject fear and benign enlightenment, according to this model, is a numerically defined pattern, a particular quantity, which might appear as a blip, an errant pulse, an unexpected surge or a simple slash on the graph of human emotional function. But where would the sense of another presence register? In the

material and metaphoric logic of the piece, interactions with the 'outside': the environments, the viewer, even the mythic space of deific or demonic exchange, stimulate the columns of light, endowing them with a semblance of embodied, communicative presence. However these engagements are also impossibly constrained. The lights constitutive matter - plasma – cannot exist outside the vacuum provided by the glass tube, which both incarcerates the brain and allows the viewer - who, in a clever play on terminology, not only grounds the piece, but also provides its only attraction³ - contact which can only ever be spectatorial. This electrical and aesthetic circuitry reveals an often overlooked fact: that the fantasy of a disembodied, telepresent, posthuman existence - a fantasy most often destined for the future – depends for its coherence on the body of the spectator existing in the present, and situated in the rarefied 'look but don't touch' atmosphere of the gallery. Similarly, the belief that the spectrum of human emotional experience can be separated into poles, designated as fear or joy, represented by numeric frequencies and assigned to a brain that has been split from itself, its body and its environment and still count as 'emotion' - like the belief that we can become 'posthuman' whilst still remaining 'human' - depends for its hubristic reach on the current errant and immeasurable nature of emotions.

If emotion is deracinated, contained and made dependent upon a system of intellectual abstraction and material fragility, how can proper haunting occur? The only difference, diversity, unaccountability or alien presence here is that provided by the nuances of the spectator's flesh, the lay of the gallery's ground and the purely speculative possibility of an other - deific or demonic, intersecting the brain's perfect rationality. A slight, typographical disturbance separates the duality of the title *I was scared to death / I could have died of joy*. Just a small slash, an accidental mark, a pen slipping somewhere and the separation is undone, the emotional extremes blended. A slight disturbance in the gallery floor and these beautiful, delicate, glass-blown objects shatter in an instant. A surge in the electro-pulsations, a shift in the frequency and the patterns that separate the emotions might collapse. Blurring: a state that characterizes both the postmodern and the posthuman, often attributed to a fear of borders dissolving and identities liquefying as the liberal human subject undergoes its 'inevitable' technologically aided

transformation. Within this transformation it may well be that fear and joy are measurable events that can be managed, balanced and set within a normative neurological range. While this might seem an unremarkable possibility, this exhibition materializes the chilling instability and unsustainability of its architecture. Joy animates its fantasy of an enlightenment sealed off from the world, fear hovers at the edges of its fine glass tubes, the material present breathes life into an immaterial, projected future. Like any bubble, no matter how intricate or finely blown, it always threatens to burst.

Dr. Frances Dyson is a writer, media artist, and associate professor of Techno-Cultural Studies at the University of California at Davis. Her writing has been published nationally and internationally, with book chapters in Catherine Richards - Excitable Tissues (Ottawa Art Gallery) 2003; Uncertain Ground (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales) 2000, The Virtual Dimension: Architecture, Representation, and Crash Culture (New York: Princeton Architectural Press) 1998, and Immersed in Technology (Massachusetts: MIT Press) 1996. She was recently awarded a Researcher in Residence from the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology (Montreal) for 2004-5. Dyson has exhibited installation/performance works in the US, Canada, Japan and Australia, and for over a decade has been a regular contributor to Australia's premier audio arts program, The Listening Room (Australian Broadcasting Corporation), where she recently completed Fur and Sheen, an experimental fictional series based in the near future. She currently serves on the board of Davis Community Television and is active in community media projects.

Endnotes

¹ In conversation Richards cited the work of Michael Persinger – a professor of neuroscience at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Canada

² Hans Moravice's book *Mind Children* is notable in this regard

³ This disjunction between the viewer and the exhibit is elaborated in both Richards' other piece in her solo exhibition *Excitable Tissues - Shroud / Chrysalis I* and her previous work *Curiosity Cabinet*, at the End of the Millennium.