Quantified Self

Senior Honors Thesis Statement

By

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This document accompanied the thesis work
in exhibition at the
John and June Allcott Undergraduate Gallery
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Department of Art
March 24 – April 5, 2024
Oral Thesis Defense: March 27, 2024

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March 31, 2024

Quantified Self is the name of the growing movement of people who track and collect data on themselves for the purpose of self-reflection or the optimization of their lives[1]. Thanks to technology, many of us inadvertently engage in Quantified Self, whether through apps such as Spotify Wrapped or our phone tracking steps. But the phenomenon goes further; sites like quantifiedself.com[2] contain an extensive archive of user self-tracking projects. Some projects track sleep, breathing, or blood oxygen levels. Some track location, productivity, money, or emotions. Some track how often the tracker got sick on planes. Since one of my majors is Statistics, I've never been far from this culture; I've even participated myself by tracking things like my work hours or worst habits. For my thesis project, which shares a name with the movement, I wanted to push this concept of using data to make sense of oneself beyond the practical into a fictionalized space. I have imagined a person with more than a casual engagement in Quantified Self, who goes further than any participants on the quantifiedself.com blogs. I wanted the perfect Quantified Self zealot. Using this exaggerated character, I explored how supposedly logical data can lead to insane and improbable results.

The form of my thesis project borrows structures from the world of Statistics. I have made an installation of graph-drawings. These drawings, done in pen and charcoal on many small squares or rectangles, use rules to govern their execution based on what is

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quantified_self
[2] https://quantifiedself.com/show-and-tell/

being monitored. The amount of time spent drawing each square or tile of an image represents a numerical value. This could be how many minutes I talked on the phone to my mom for that day, or how many socializing hours I had on days of that week when I ate a quesadilla. On top of these graph drawings I have added line graphs. These graphs are made up of photo-collagraph printed images that are then cut into squares and hung on top of the other graphs. Their relative height on the wall indicates a numerical value. Strings also connect the square points of this graph, reminiscent of a conspiracy theorist tying events together. All these graph-images share a common x-axis or a common linear timeline, where every six inches represents one week. The entire installation spans one year and six weeks. The graph-images grow across the gallery, becoming monstrous and branching out – escaping the typical square confines of a graph. The installation also includes pieces of ephemera left over from the creation process: ink samples on the wall, bits of string, and dead pens littering the floor. It feels like the graphs' creator is still making them and just stepped away for a minute.

I am inspired by other artists who make art from their own self-data, such as Danica Phelps' *Income's Outcome*[3]. In those works, she takes data about the amount of money she made from selling drawings and what she then spent that money on to make sprawling drawing installations with an infinite life cycle. For my systems, I took some data from my technology (like text messages sent). But I collected most of the data by hand over the last year. The data visualized in this project focuses on numbers related to socializing, like hours out of the house, the number of people around at a random moment, or "presentability" for the day. Taken altogether, the data in the graphs tell a

[3] https://www.danicaphelpsprojects.com/incomes-outcome

story. As the timeline of the graph progressed, I wanted what I was tracking to get more voyeuristic with intimate personal numbers, like the length of my nails. The collected data becomes more arbitrary and less coherent as the graph goes on. The data about socialization seems to suggest that the subject is isolating herself, as hours out of the house and the number of people around drop to zero. The imagery in the graph drawings also always shows the subject completely alone.

Fig 1. Installation of *Income's Outcome* by Danica Phelps

All the data that has acted as a system for my art-making for this project are from my own life. However, this is not a self-portrait. I imagine these graphs are made in earnest by the Quantified Self zealot. The Zealot loves data, or at least loves the collecting of numbers, the repetitive action, and the satisfaction that comes from that seemingly purposeful activity. This activity gives her an illusory sense of control. She tracks every aspect of her life: the important, the almost unrelated, and the arbitrary. She graphs, obsesses over, and models all these statistics, then tears it down and starts again. The graphs hang on the walls of her home, branching and growing around her like a mold.

She tries to be logical. She tries to build a replacement for introspection. She is self-loathing and self-obsessed. She gets lost in observing herself, creating chaotic graphs about things that cannot actually be quantified. Ultimately, these graphs become the document of her spiral toward insanity. These graph-images, made by me while inhabiting the mind of the Zealot, make up my thesis project. Within the drawn imagery comprising the graphs, we see her in different locations, but she is always surrounded by her collection of graphs on the wall. She is also slowly recognizing and reacting to the camera, to the idea of being watched. In the end, she becomes a hermit, driven mad by the constant spying on herself, stuck away from the rest of the world. We can only peer at her through the cracks in her blinds. We can only see her through her graphs.

The art-making process behind these graphs was important for me to identify with the Zealot woman. The repetitive actions necessary for drawing and printmaking allowed me to channel some of her obsessive nature. Being forced to sit with and think about each piece of data as a drawing or print also allowed me to experience the type of focus the Zealot would have on each element and each number. The formal quality of the drawing also allowed me to convey the character's emotional change from sane to more unhinged as the graphs progressed. The hand shifted from tight, precise drawings into something more erratic as the Zealot got caught up in and lost in the data. It's important to me that this work has a grungy look and that you can tell it was made by hand. Data visualization is typically clean and minimal, straight to the point. In allowing my graphs to carry an expressive "hand", I hope to subvert this expectation and point viewers to the mental state of this character. It also prepares the viewer to start doubting the perfection and logic of the data.

The Zealot woman in this story is looking to the graphs for understanding and solutions, and I have not made it easy for her to find those. I purposely created many pitfalls in these graphs. In the data collection process, I often estimated and recorded numbers from memory or skipped days of observations. The original data her graphs are based on are flawed. The presentation of the graphs also causes problems. In typical data visualizations, clarity and communication is critical. This is true in many artworks using data, such as Sarah Bryant's *Figure Study*[4], which uses population data to make beautiful graphical curves, emphasizing simplicity and understanding. While I admire these works, I wanted to subvert this expectation for clarity in my graph drawings. I do this in several ways. First, my graph drawings are based on tile plots, which are not a favorite visualization for data scientists because they can be hard to read and muddy data by drawing arbitrary lines in the sand. The graphs also layer across and on top of each other. They don't have clean edges, and it can be hard to tell where they begin and end. I am introducing further ambiguity to these visualizations by adding images over the graphs. My strategy of using "amount of drawing" is not necessarily a great way to communicate a numerical value. The graphs are purposely messy and hard to read clearly.

[4] https://bigjumppress.com/section/410546-Figure%20Study.html

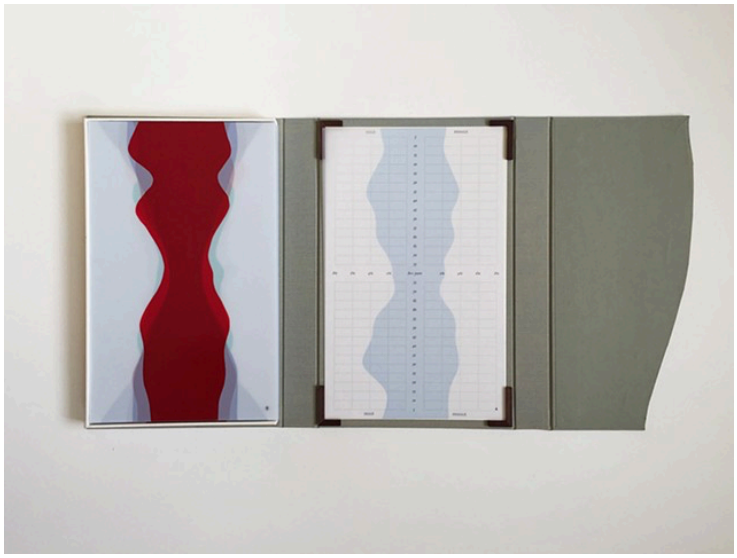

Fig 2. *Figure Study* by Sarah Bryant

Works like Phelps' and Bryant's mentioned above better align with the Quantified Self movement's original goals, emphasizing data's beauty and self-reflective qualities. And while I admire those qualities, I wanted my work to suggest some negatives relating to data. Other artists like Marilene Oliver[5] and Kathryn Combs[6] create work that uses data to explore these themes of surveillance and the collection of personal data. Their work is ominous and chaotic, confronting the viewer with data's nontrivial and potentially threatening power. While my project is not about outside surveillance, I am still inspired by these works' visual chaos and themes. It's more common to be wary of big companies or the government stealing our data. But what about what we do with our own data? Constantly watching ourselves can quickly turn from a self-aware to a self-obsessed action.

[5] https://www.marileneoliver.com/portfolio/mydatabody
[6] http://www.kathryn-combs.com/data-warp/rrwegk0wtjcf6tlkk0xrt154pueot7

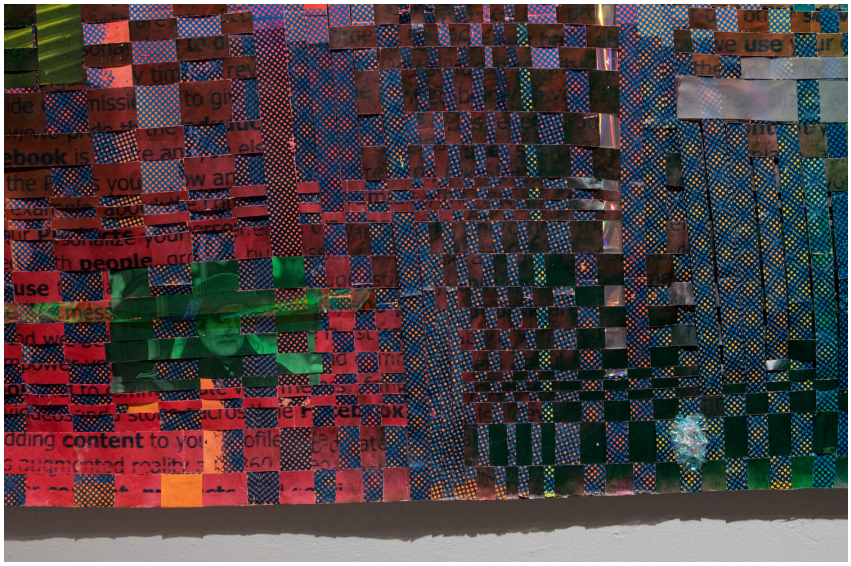

Fig 3. Part of *Data Warp* by Kathryn Combs

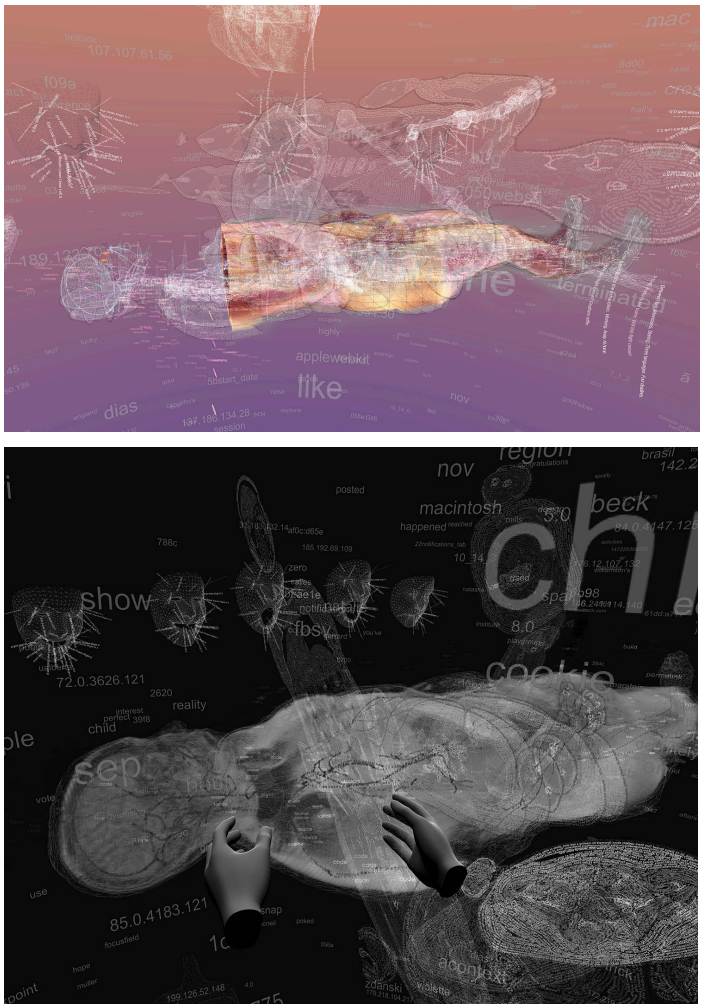

Fig 4. *My Data Body* by Mariliene Oliver

Quantified Self is a project that uses data to create art about the dangers of data. The Zealot's insanity stemmed from a place of logic. Similarly, many conspiracy theories start with a crumb of truth. "Alien" UFO sightings in the 1950s and 1960s were often sightings of new US spy planes[7]. It was true that people were seeing impossible, unidentified flying objects, but improbable conclusions were born from that truth. Misinformation is on the rise in the US, and these crumbs of truth and bad data can be used to prop it up. In my project, I used real data to create a fictional story. Governments, news organizations, and corporations can do the same. Colgate can use data to mislead consumers about how much dentists like their toothpaste[8]. Politicians and reporters can warp crime statistics to support racist ideologies and stoke fear[9][10]. Data can lie. A blind trust in anything supposedly "data-driven" is dangerous. This factor most separates me from my imagined zealot character who created these graphs. Despite all the mess in the data I've thrown her way, she still believes it holds some magical powers. She believes all the answers are buried in her Excel sheets. She clings to the graphs as proof that she's logical while fighting her true, obsessive, crazy nature. The Zealot falls into one of the biggest criticisms of Quantified Self, which is Data Fetishisation[11]. The idea of Data Fetishisation is that people become so enamored with having the numbers that they ignore complexity and reduce the data to easy, one-dimensional interpretations. It can push a person away from self-knowledge, which

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[7] https://www.nytimes.com/1997/08/03/us/cia-admits-government-lied-about-ufo-sightings.html

[8] https://marketinglaw.osborneclarke.com/retailing/colgates-80-of-dentists-recommend-claim-under-fire/

[9] https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/10/23/white-supremacists-favorite-myths-about-black-crime-rates-take-another-hit-bjs-study

[10] https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2007/08/22/pat-buchanan-again-cites-racist-sources-black-crime

[11] http://fws.commacafe.org/resources/tamar_sharon_and_dorien_zandbergen.pdf

is the whole goal of many engaged with Quantified Self. Turning oneself into a number, or a graph, or a collection of monstrous graph-drawing installations isn't necessarily an example of self-discovery or self-knowledge; it is reducing oneself to a less complex version of a self. It erases parts of you. In the end, the Zealot may not be just a character; she may be a reduced version of me. She is the person you get when the data whittles me down to just my insecurities, fears, and obsessions.

Quantified Self (full installation)
517” x 112”
Drawing and Print Installation
2024

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