

**SURVEYING SKIN QUARTET**  
CYNTHIA TROUP

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Published by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *The World Factbook* can be found in the public domain of the online world: [www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html). Like all online publications, theoretically it is available instantly; its reach is supposedly unimpeded by geography, unlimited by the number and kind of readers. And when accessed electronically, in wired cities, suburbs and dwellings, this floating compendium seeks to anchor cyberspace to a single, complete survey of the contemporary, inhabited globe.

The *Factbook* has a long history in the foreign intelligence activities of the US. Within that remote culture, it serves as 'basic finished intelligence': that is, information on all the geo-political subdivisions of the world is coolly amassed and 'finished' into ready-reference maps; graphs and percentages; definitions and indexes. 'Finishing' involves standardising, formatting, bringing into alphabetic and other conventional orders. Of course, the order of the *Factbook* is ultimately vertical, determined by the notion of a world political order in which the US is not simply dominant, but ideally 'on top'.

Although the *Factbook's* stated purpose is to provide support to the US Government, online it is more than ever liable to be consulted for various purposes. Online, where the great extent and mass of its detail seem weightless, the *Factbook* is more than ever susceptible to appropriation – in countless public and private ways. *Skin Quartet* began with this premise: it borrows and abstracts from the *Factbook*, devising different coordinates, different relationships, an entirely different context for its figures and categories. In the broadest sense, *Skin Quartet* explores their potential for a provocative ordering of architectural space, of installation and performance.

*Skin Quartet* is the first collaboration between Louisa Bufardecì and David Young. However, previous works by these artists demonstrate a fascination with published 'facts' as a source of creative stimulus; a shared interest in dissembling the closed schemes of formal knowledge and subjecting them to reinterpretation. In many ways, this shared interest has fostered a similar methodology – both artists have used published texts to elaborate the form and language of particular projects.

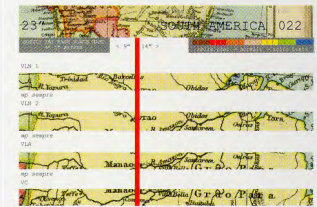
Bufardecì's installations reflect an ongoing concern with the scientific claims of various disciplines or fields of knowledge. *ColourPhonics* (2001), for example, referred to books on linguistic theory, transposing the International Phonetic Alphabet into tidy colour charts. Government rhetoric has been another preoccupation: *Cold Storage* (2001) extrapolated from Department of Immigration reports on asylum-seekers. From these, Bufardecì designed and built a maze of empty storage boxes in the Anna Schwartz Gallery.

Intricacy and the unexpected have also characterised Young's practice. A volume of scholarly archaeology has been a basis for the *Val Camonica Pieces* (1995–2003). This series of instrumental works takes diagrams of ancient rock carvings, and reconfigures them onto musical staves. In more recent pieces, the carvings have appeared in the composer's scores as literal, figurative transcriptions. Likewise, from *Ara* (1995) through to the music theatre project *Maps* (2000, 2002), Young has repeatedly included elements from printed maps in his compositions. *Maps* was a collaborative venture between the arts companies Aphids (Melbourne) and Kokon (Copenhagen), conceived as an opportunity to consider connections between cartography and music notation.

For *Skin Quartet*, then, the CIA *Factbook* has provided Bufardecì and Young with common programmatic and structuring material. Not without a certain audacity and irony, the subject of the work is the whole world: specifically, 'the world' encompassed as the *Factbook's* seven continents; its register of 268 countries and 'separate geographic entities'; population estimates and breakdowns corresponding to each entity. The artists have each determined ways to plot these features of the *Factbook* into their respective media, producing a new work centred on digital video and live music. *Skin Quartet* pursues its subject as a set of exact proportions, but it also betrays the principles of exactitude and correspondence, especially through disjunctions of scale. Visually and musically, the template of seven sections is layered over with independent effects that draw the material back into the realm of subjective, embodied experience.

For her video component of *Skin Quartet*, Bufardecì has approached the *Factbook* according to its own formulaic mode. Focusing on the population statistics, she has rigorously manipulated them to create another, highly selective 'world' of ratios. So birth rates and life expectancy, ethnicities and nationalities have been converted to relative values, then mapped along a horizontal axis. This axis represents the total of the world's population in terms of the separate continents – Africa; South America; Australia and Oceania; North America; Antarctica; Asia; Europe. The video is carefully invested with all these particulars.

Yet Bufardecì's procedure has dispersed and flattened-out the information, turning its logic and authority sideways, literally. Time and motion emphasise the dispersal; the video's horizontal axis also represents time. Over a period of 37 minutes, the persistent movement of the video display across the screen further undoes the legibility of names and ratios. Meanwhile, the minutes themselves become the distracted, seemingly pliant time of concert performance.



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01–02 Louisa Bufardecì & David Young  
*Skin Quartet* (2003)  
 courtesy of the artists and  
 Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne

Possibly the most striking aspect of Bufardecì's work is the series of images grafted onto the horizontal framework: video footage of human skin, intensely magnified. This footage, this dossier, foregrounds the theme of ethnicity. It illustrates our tendency to infer ethnicity from physical traits like skin, eyes, lips, and hair. But here, magnification shows skin in all its opacity, in its untold subtleties of texture and hue. The 'evidence' of skin colour is rendered impossible to consolidate. Moreover, set off by the panoramic format of the screen, Bufardecì's close-ups take on the appearance of landscapes – raw, vast, and flowing. Each has a unique topography, weathered by climate, by history; under such scrutiny, mythic qualities are conferred, even as whole environments are suggested.

If there is ambiguity in the close-ups, as a contrast to the text and gridlines they nonetheless connote nature and the physical world. In this way they set the scene for an awareness of the body. Thus the large video screen is much less a window than a mirror held up to the sample of porous, breathing surfaces and the selves assembled in the gallery: the audience, the musicians. The musicians, whose instrumental and bodily voices project into the space for a while, animate Bufardecì's treatment of the *Factbook*, making it evocative of still other things.

Especially since the Maps project, Young has approached his score-writing as a form of map-making, in which colour and pattern, irregular shapes and outlines are added to the array of signs composed for musical interpretation. The scores can appear expansive and unusually dense with associations. They acknowledge the possibility of a more agile notation, one that concedes space to experiments and to dialogue.

The score for *Skin Quartet* has been developed as a paperless document, another video that complements and interpolates Bufardecì's work. It cites Bufardecì's footage of skin, for example, yet as part of a proliferation of visual imagery that includes x-rays of a human skeleton, and extracts from a historical atlas. Still retaining descriptive qualities, these images are ascribed musical meanings: the vertical axis of pitch intersects the horizontal axis of time, organising four instrumental parts into seven movements. Bufardecì's red gridlines reappear as barlines, often integrated with ordinary musical markings for speed, dynamics and timbre.

Together, the quartet's seven movements comprise a catalogue of bowing and fingering techniques, of effects available from the violin, viola and cello. They also comprise an inventory of notational styles. Besides colour and graphic notation, there are directions as in a play script (Antarctica), and standard black dots on a ruled staff (Europe). This is one way that Young's composition imitates the *Factbook's* commitment to lists; its claims to self-sufficiency. The choice of ensemble by itself follows from these ideas. In the Western classical tradition, the four instruments of the string quartet have been equated with the 'universal' human voice types of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. Young elaborates on the analogy, even strains it, calling for instruments of different sizes, and assigning a solo to a quarter-sized violin (Asia).

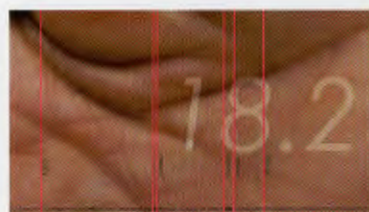
While the two videos both act as a catalyst for the ensemble playing, Young's video approximates the role of a conductor. That is, 'page turns' have been programmed according to musical durations, imposing strict continuity on the musicians' performance. Clearly there is a tension between such an imposition, such a condition for reading the music, and the score's visual appeal. For the players, the small, individual screens may succeed as music stands, yet they also amount to an 'eye' more controlling than the gallery's large screen. Perhaps this is in keeping with the status of the string quartet as a particularly demanding form of chamber music, characterised by intensity – complex writing and virtuosic playing.

*Skin Quartet* 'un-finishes' *The World Factbook*, energetically coopting it into theatre. As chamber spectacle and concert, the project boldly reorients this source towards the senses; towards seeing and hearing via the sense of touch. The skin of eight hands presses, recognises, receives: fingerboards, bows and strings; wood, metal and water. Like human skin, these natural materials act and react with immediacy. Intimately aligned with the bodies of the performers, they reach the ears of the audience and the walls of the gallery. They reach backwards and forwards to the video screens, and to the *Factbook* without discrimination. Adapting relationships of number, colour, and line to sound, the music opens Bufardecì's work further to memory and imagination.

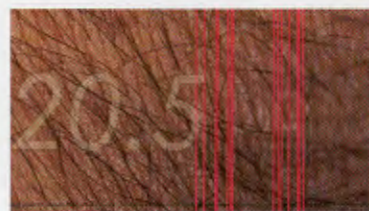
Video, score, and performance indicate horizons wide and strange. At length, what seems to persist through *Skin Quartet* is a sense that any survey of 'the world' must be a risk, a dream – a most precarious unity.



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