

Niki Tulk, "Interview with Caroline Bassett and Sally-Jane Norman at the Sussex Humanities Lab (University of Sussex)"

1. What is your lab called and where is it?

We are the Sussex Humanities Lab (SHL), based at the University of Sussex, in the Downs outside the City of Brighton, UK. We are a research centre/programme and we span a series of Schools of Study—with a strong base in media and film (School of Media, Film and Music), and in HAHP (History, Art History and Philosophy) also in Education schools and in informatics and engineering (E&I) (computer scientists). 'We' are (i) the programme (SHL), (ii) the named and supported members of the team—academics at all levels, technical support people, project manager, admin (iii) we have a physical 'lab' space – we call this the 'Digital Humanities Lab', It is at the heart of our work, although its not always where we do things...

2. What sorts of projects and activities form the core of your work? Is there a specific temporal or technological focus for your lab?

We are initially funded for four years—so this means our tempo needs to be pretty rapid. We are tasked with providing enough evidence of some form of sustainability at the end of that time, to become a permanent research centre within the University—in some shape or other. We don't necessarily think we should simply seek to 'do the same again', at the end of our project time. We have a bunch of official KPIs (performance indicators) and the plan we bid for the funds with also sets out a series of targets (for engagement, impact—look up the UK meaning of that term..., and for grant capture). Those are rather official though. I would expand all that to say that we want to:

*Generate new forms of thinking and new forms of research—both in the humanities in general (where digital transformation produces new possibilities and opens new perspectives) and in relation to the computational as the subject of inquiry. That's the big goal really. To do that we need to:

* Intervene into the fields that together constitute digital humanities (lower case), by which we mean both traditional DH areas and also cultural, media, digital media, code studies, areas which have been exploring digital transformation in different ways for an equally long time. We think DH can become broader, more diverse, more multi-mediated—and that it needs to become more critical. We recognize the tension between critical theories of DH that can just produce abstraction, and the need to engage materially with new possibilities and new methodologies arising through big data, various forms of automation, and other new computational technologies. We think it can be productive—and that it's fine if it sometimes produce antagonism. Actually in our lab we argue all the time. We are superb at arguing ...

Including about our name: we deliberately adopted the "Sussex Humanities Lab"—rather than "Digital Humanities Lab"—name, precisely to demarcate ourselves from technical servicing-oriented DH bodies that have spread over the past couple of decades. The frequent mobilisation of big digital infrastructure funds as a rationale for developing (otherwise poorly supported) humanities research has resulted in a lot of projects where the (funded) tail wags the (confused) dog. We did not want to be identifiable with these countless, very similar organisations that have jumped onto the DH/ "cyberinfrastructure" bandwagon (e-science in the UK), simply to

develop new kinds of insufficiently conceptualised and critiqued demonstrations of technical prowess and gimmicky computational affordances doomed to swift obsolescence. We want the dog to wag its own tail - happily and excitedly, and in ways that can energise and contagiously enthuse others.

We want to make a difference in public discourse and debate in various fields—around public heritage and public culture and performance, around social justice and (digital) media, around digital transformation and/in relation to broader cultural forms and politics (how do fake news and big data connect? Could you map that using sonic programming?) So we want to talk to people way beyond 'strict academia'.

To make any of these kinds of interventions possible we need to:

- Win public funding (and also expand our funding sources because these sources aren't very inter-disciplinary and are contracting). We need this because it is the way to get support for research that pushes traditional arts and humanities boundaries/limits—larger teams, bigger calls on equipment, more complex work strands, combining performance, multimedia, with data analysis, critical theory, access, source, issues.
- We also need to work to change the institution we're in—to make it better able to handle DH work—for instance by engaging with infra-structure questions (around asset-handling, networks, etc.) and open source/publishing/beyond text questions, and by engaging with curriculum issues—we're not teaching but we're generating short learning courses, open days, open events—and we're just undertaking some survey work to look at the connected work on DH across our campus; the point is to become the expert knowers inside the University so we can influence new courses/programmes.
- Institutional change also means shaking up traditionally managed territories and modes of operation to facilitate if not catalyse new forms of collaboration. Sussex was founded as a pioneering university whose interdisciplinary energies could/ would (and did) broker whole new fields of scholarship by convening then unlikely/ inhabitual bedfellows—for example, engaging human geography and economics to underpin holistic development studies, or cognitive science and philosophy to boost new approaches to artificial intelligence and artificial life in computing. To build on the radical rethinking of interactions across disciplines and sectors that was Sussex's initial hallmark now means leaping over some of the siloes and disciplinary autarchies that have since become quite fiercely instated. These are moreover consolidated by territorialised university accountability practices (e.g. across schools, departments), and internal competition for revenue streams, that disincentivise the kinds of collaboration we were set up to promote. Part of the battle consists of making constant, stubborn arguments for added value and returns on investment that are not immediate. We're caught up between a sunset-clause rock and a long-term-seeding-rationale hard place.

3. Who uses the lab? Is it a space for students, for researchers, for artists, for seminars?

The SHL team—which is currently five—and a half—full professors and a project manager (we are the Core leadership—the half are the computing profs we pull in ex officio and ditto the Library), 4 fixed term lecturers (something like associate profs in US-speak but not tenured), 4 post-doctoral researchers/lab researchers, a Library sponsored post-doc, five funded doctoral students—all of whom are brilliant (check out their projects on our website), and two lab

technicians. None of the full professors are full time on the SHL project – we all have bits of our selves attached to the Lab—and have to teach etc. as well... the Team people teach but not that much, and the Lab technicians are part time, but dedicated to us!

The exception at the moment is that the lab is not used for timetabled teaching of UG (undergrad) students. The reason is that if we did that, we would stop being a research lab within a term and become a teaching room. This is about pressure on space really. We run loads of events that UG students (and everybody else are welcome to, and some events that are designated for them. Just not week in/week out teaching.

Given the penury of space and readily available research expertise that is our broader university context (i.e. there are masses of fantastic researchers, but most are tightly tied into their own programmes), we have to position ourselves carefully. If we are to motivate and inspire colleagues to pursue the new kinds of research we stand for, we must facilitate their efforts as far as possible—hosting and co-organising their research events, mentoring their funding applications, etc. But we must also avoid becoming a mere "service", a "go-to" lab for churning out other people's bids and ensuring other people's logistics (the trap so often evident in more traditional DH centres and labs). This means ensuring that our we're not jeopardising our own, internal lab-driven initiatives, which remain our priority, yet are encouraging and helping others whose research initiatives may be of direct interest and value to the lab. We hold all kinds of open days alongside our regular events (seminars, workshops, etc) and try to keep our profile, our ethos, and our raison d'être as transparent as possible, to avoid the—terribly easy—slippages in perception that might undermine our work.

4. What sorts of knowledge does the lab produce (writing, demonstrations, patents etc.) and how is it circulated (e.g. conference papers, pamphlets, books, videos, social media)?

I guess we produce:

(words):

- Monographs
- Journal articles
- Chapters etc.
- Non-standard written outputs (for e.g. art projects, festival publications, think tank reports etc.)
- (live media/beyond text)

We also produce:

- Performances – and document them in various ways
- Installations
- Hacking/Making workshops
- Software—notably so far this is emerging in relation to work on music technology.

We circulate what we make/write/do—through standard academic routes; that's conferences, symposium, seminars. Also by way of social media—blogs, tweets, facebook—(although the later is contested somewhat because some of our team want to be fully open source).

Developments like a score-following software system for ensemble music making are circulated as part of their "natural" testing process, through activities with local schools and amateur orchestras, and with disaffected and socially troubled groups we access via local and regional councils. Similarly, hacking workshops involving young children demand other forms of circulation, where researchers from education and psychology engage directly with children, families, primary education providers etc. Lab members are regularly involved in Algoraves and all kinds of experimental performance events in venues that are definitely not "academic".

Given the exciting diversity of our team, and the multiple skills and profiles of many of its members, we function as a network per se that has lively ramifications across a host of other more specialist networks (e.g. critical theory and media, museums and archives, participatory and inclusive design, performance technologies).

5. Tell us about your infrastructure. Do you have a designated space and how does that work?

I'm not sure if this answers the question. But actually most of our 'infra-structure' is human—that's to say we invested most of what we won, on bringing in our fixed term researchers in the right places across the university so we had the right specialisms to draw on.

Other than that:

Our funding let us establish a lab space—which is a small but adaptable performance, making, seminar, talk space. The kind of equipment in there includes excellent audio/sonic equipment, a good rig, screens etc.

There is much less 'standard' text-based DH equipment than might be expected. (scanners etc.) This is partly because all of our team are also in Schools and have bases and equipment there, and this includes e.g. informatics equipment (servers/workstations etc.) and Library/Archive facilities. We are aware of a tension between the two kinds of activities—'traditional DH' if you like and performance, media arts foci—essentially we want our one room to be full of equipment AND empty and re-purposable at the same time. We are working with portable/put-away-able hardware where at all possible. (e.g. 3D printers that can be moved around to various sites for use). We have very limited storage space so have to look carefully at what we host and how we can best keep memories of those activities, so they can feed into our broader identity and continue to shape our evolving trajectory. It's a tricky trade-off: archiving and streaming lab activities is itself a constant lab project, not to say challenge. Being able to turn work spaces into an anarchic table tennis arena (we keep the ball alive, playing it off the walls, ceilings, and floor, as well as that boring rectangle called the table) is very important and therapeutic.

And we have a glorious outdoor space with wooden benches which makes us a highly coveted space for a good part of the (sunny) Brighton year. It's great for evening drinks and general conversation. There is a small garden with some herbs, trees and shrubs, occasional rabbits, and the library cat may deign to visit.

6. What sorts of support does the lab receive? (e.g. government grants, institutional grants, private donors)

We won a £3m peer reviewed University Competition to establish the Centre. That's key start-up funding. And we are supported by the grants we are winning. Currently we are running or about to run with four: a big BBC/oral history grant, two networks, a music tech grant, a surveillance grant. And some bits and pieces... The BBC one is important because its large scale and supports us expanding.

7. What are your major theoretical touchstones?

Critical theory—Stiegler, and/as evolution out of Frankfurt, Latour, feminist theorists of technology—Haraway. Engagement with new materialisms. Media archeology/medium theory/software studies (German medium theory and beyond)—we many of us are also cultural theorists, with roots in material cultural studies— and are therefore always in tension with German medium theory.

In performance/media art terms: Claire Bishop arises a great deal these days.

Karen Barad and feminist writing on "intra-action" and performativity. Gilbert Simondon on individuation, Nigel Thrift on Politics and Affect. André Leroi-Gourhan on prosthetisation of memory. Margaret Morrison and Mary Morgan on modeling and mediation.

Gibson's affordances, Edwin Hutchins (Cognition in the Wild), Sha Xin Wei on topological media. Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska on Life After New Media. Daston and Galison. Brian Rotman. Helga Nowotny—The Cunning of Uncertainty. etc etc etc

We share interests across the Lab on e.g. 'standard' DH scholarship—Hayles/Moretti/Liu—questions of digital publishing/Open Source etc.

We're also interested in key thinking around digital everyday and childhood.

One way to see what we're interested in would be to look at our publications lists. (I will get one over to you). It's a hard question—because we come from a wide range of places...

8. What would you say is the lab's most significant accomplishment to date?

WE set ourselves up—over 21 people—and we meet and operate together, and argue and talk. We are a new space in the university. I guess in funding terms a big achievement is the big BBC oral history grant, but some of the best events/exchanges so far have been around networks—for instance on automation anxiety. And my personal favourite day in the lab was with a sawn off cello, a modular synth, and a man turning an old LP player into a kind of serial orchestra.

Smaller grants have produced exciting events: an early career researcher carried off a British Academy Rising Star Engagement Award he used to organise a major conference/ performance on "Designing Interfaces for Creativity", where one of his keynotes was a CERN physicist talking about scientific infrastructure and creativity... We've collaborated on / contributed to a major international "Live Interfaces" conference hosted at Sussex, and mentor colleagues on

large grants that involve high profile external workshops (e.g. at IRCAM - Paris, STEIM - Amsterdam). We try to ensure that SHL presence is sufficiently in evidence to consolidate our identity and networks, though our resources for communications purposes remain extremely limited.

9. Could you briefly describe your plans for the lab over the next 3-5 years?

We plan to maintain our breadth across performance/music media arts, history, everyday life and mediated life, critical theory—but/and we also want to push our critical edge. So much work in DH hasn't been critical in orientation, and we do many of us, in different ways, come out of that tradition. So we're intending to keep asking questions about gender, power and digital technology, automated epistemologies—and their supposedly 'neutrality' ('if it's a computer it can't be racist' kind of arguments), and to integrate those into our more material work more deeply.

We want to become a sustainable/sustained programme unit at Sussex—but not in a way that fixes 'what we do'—we'd like to be a travelling lab—in that we traverse the relevant areas to ask interesting questions.

10. What makes your lab a lab?

Well we have a soldering iron..... Although it turned out it was illegal for a while (health and safety)! But the real reason is that we want to do things in the humanities that don't fit in normal humanities places... that's why we wanted to be 'humanities lab'.

I would add that that being a lab and having a lab are very different things...

We needed the Lab—concept—and the promise of the Lab space—to get off the ground and to shape our project. That is we needed to argue to BE a lab to differentiate our project, to pull people around us who wanted to contribute, to get recognition of funding needs in.

We need to actually have a lab to: curate a space, to make a home for people whose office desks are all over a dispersed campus, to make a space to concentrate ideas/conflicts/events, and to develop and identity, to be a group, to have a flexible space to do things in.

We also use our lab to play table tennis in..... which is good for our souls and our mind-brain co-ordination.... We threaten to embark on some TT motion capture, but this hasn't been done yet.