Mike Phillips and Geoff Cox.

'Donald Rodney - Autoicon. The Death of an Artist'

> "There were no corpses in the time-tombs, no dusty skeletons. The cyber-architectonic ghosts which haunted them were embalmed in the metallic codes of memory tapes, three-dimensional molecular transcriptions of their living originals, stored among the dunes as a momentous act of faith, in the hope that one day the physical recreation of the coded personalities would be possible."
> (Ballard J.G.1992)

The Digital-Body Politic:

When a friend dies, and they are around your age, it not only hurts - the shock and the loss - it throws your own mortality into sharp focus. When the death has been predicted, medically mapped out and preordained since birth, the shock is just as great. When the friend is an outstanding artists, with an international profile, that shock is transferred to an entire generation of artists. Donald Rodney died on 4th of March 1998.

> "Donald Rodney's work provided a uniquely constructive bridge between the politically engaged black art movement and the more formal and diverse concerns of later decades. All this work, in what ever style gave expression to a distinctive black way of seeing. His courageous work around sickle cell is rooted in this commitment. He was creative, innovative and experimental to the end."
> (Stuart Hall 1998)

In 1988 the magazine 20/20, in a review of one of his exhibitions, announced the death of the artist Donald Rodney. Donald was not dead but dying, the premature announcement predicted the inevitable result of a Darwinian curse which has afflicted Donald since birth. Sickle Cell Anaemia is a long slow degenerative disease which resulted in Rodney's incarceration in hospitals and various technological apparatus. The result of this lifetime of physical atrophy was a creative mind that had a chillingly surgical perspective on the human condition. His physical condition provided an emotive palette for the acute and richly disturbing creations that populated his shows, with pieces literally etched from his body. Rodney must now move to a higher plane of evolution.

figure 1 Mediaspace – Memoria Technica.

Rodney's body had, for many years, existed in a close symbiotic relationship with the medical technology that has kept him alive. On a regular basis his body was invaded by steel devices to drain internal juices, only to be replaced and replenished by sanitised fluid. Enclosed bone structures were excavated and replaced by metal and plastic, a continual process of scarring and restructuring. And left behind; a data trail of information; photographs, X-ray's, scans, measurements, data, scars, and imprints. It is rare to find such a perfect, detailed, body documentary. This 'document' defines another body, a body that exists in data-space, a body of images and measurements.

AUTOICON was one of the many projects Rodney was working at the time of his death, the intention was to integrate the body of medical data with an 'expert system' synthesised from interviews, and a rule based montage machine that would allow Autoicon to carry on generating works of art. Like most of his projects it was collaborative:

> "In recent years, he was able to weave some of his key relationships into an effective art making collective, known affectionately as 'Donald Rodney plc'. Through this, his capacity to translate the copious flow of ideas in his numerous sketch books into epic artwork, often directed from a hospital bed, increased exponentially."
> (Keith Piper 1998)

The Donald Rodney Autoicon is a multifaceted record of his body, a 'data' body, and a body that will now remain active in cyberspace. More importantly the Autoicon attempts to encapsulate the creative mind of Rodney. Whilst many of the elements for the project were in place at the time of his death, the synthesis of Donald's working process and personality must now be drawn from the memories of the close

group of friends (Donald Rodney plc), in collaboration with organisations such as Camerawork and InIVA (the Institute of International Visual Arts).

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), founder of utilitarianism and architect of the now (in)famous Panopticon; or the Inspection House (1791), left instructions for the construction of his Autoicon. Two hundred and fifty years latter his Autoicon still sits in the corridor at UCL. His body preserved in wax, his head mummified and his vital organs conserved in a pot under his seat. 'Donald Rodney Autoicon' is inspired by the Bentham dream of integrating the dead with the living (Rodney attended the Slade, UCL, 1985-87). Bentham has been the source of much web analogy, Foucault (1975) critiques the Panopticon and the techno-voyeristic society, whilst the Autoicon vividly anticipates the advent of Web Avatars. The Rodney Autoicon is being fashioned from the body of medical information gathered over a lifetime, by assembling a virtual body he will be able to exist in a pure information space. Like Bentham, Rodney will join the distinguished club of the un-dead. In this case the symbiotic relationship with technology will be taken full circle, a continuum from the organic - through the medical translations - to a complete digital manifestation. This surrogate body, the digital portfolio, provides a framework which counters Stone's concern about leaving 'behind' the body or "meat".

> "The discourse of visionary virtual world builders is rife with images of imaginal bodies, freed from the constraints that flesh imposes. Cyberspace developers foresee a time when they will be able to forget about the body. But it is important to remember that virtual community originates in, and must return to, the physical. No refigured virtual body, no matter how beautiful, will slow the death of cyberpunk with AIDS. Even in the age of the technosocial subject, life is lived through bodies."
> (Stone, A. R. 1991)

An acute statement considering the digital body is all that is left, bar the memories and the 'body' of work ('body' of work which now fragments without the 'real' body to hold it together). Indeed, without the disease the digital body would not exist. Rodney's 'Psalms' (1998), an autonomous wheelchair, attempts to articulate the presence or lack of presence of the body. Unable to attend his own gallery openings a wheelchair was designed to take his place. Incorporating a neural network, the chair would wander through the gallery intent on pursuing it's path, only to be ignored or interrupted by visitors standing in its way. It would then desperately attempt to negotiate a new path, before again pursuing its destination.
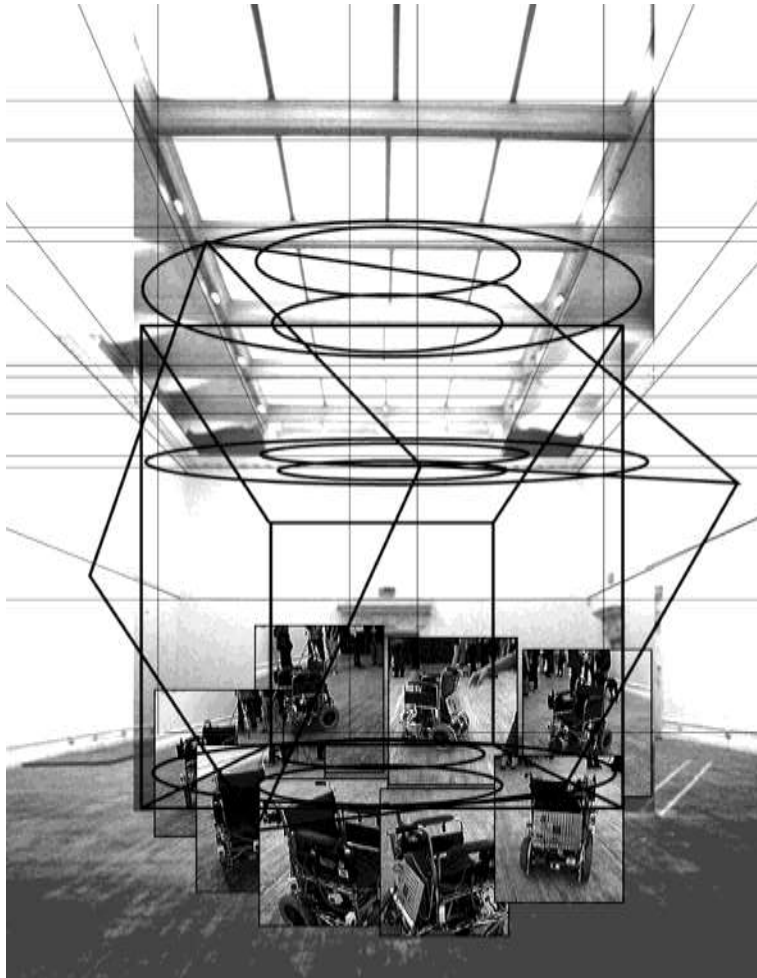
Figure 2 Mediaspace Psalms

The Autoicon will be endowed with Rodney's memories and experiences, fleeting images of the past, captured in a dynamic digital album of live 'media'. The inclusion of an artificial intelligence allows visitors to enter into conversation and discuss the development of new ideas and projects, that can evolve and be maintained in the organic Rodney's absence. This generative element of the system challenges traditional notions of artistic creativity and autonomy.

Figure 3 Mediaspace Psalms 2

Dreaming of Christmas:

The Autoicon project raises some salient issues surrounding the notion of creativity, the creative process and the institutions that surround them. The Autoicon incorporates an interactive conversation between the user and the virtual Rodney. Similar in many ways to ELIZA (Weizenbaum, 1966) an early Artificial Intelligence program that simulates the behaviour of a Rogerian therapist:

A conversation with ELIZA - "a friend you could never have before". 4/9/98

> ELIZA: Hello. I am ELIZA. How can I help you?
> You: I would like to talk about creativity
> ELIZA: Can you elaborate on that?
> You: Is there creativity after life?
> ELIZA: Please go on.
> You: What happens when an artist dies?
> ELIZA: Does that question interest you?
> You: Do you have an opinion?
> ELIZA: Oh, I have an opinion.
> You: Can you make art?

ELIZA: Why do you ask?
You: I want to know if you are creative.
ELIZA: Do you wish that I'm creative?
You: Are A.I.'s creative?
ELIZA: Would you like it if they were not A.I.'s creative?
You: Is that a creative question?
ELIZA: Please go on.
You: Do you dream?
ELIZA: Do you dream often?
You: Yes I dream, I remember the dead artist.
ELIZA: Does thinking of the dead artist bring anything else to mind?
You: I wonder if he still dreams
ELIZA: Do you wish that he still dream?
You: If he was an Artificial Intelligence now, would he dream?
ELIZA: Do you wish that he was an artificial intelligence now would he dream?
You: Yes!
ELIZA: You are sure?
You: Do you think dreaming is creative?
ELIZA: Oh, I think dreaming is creative.

Using a set of simple grammatical rules, key words and an approximate matching technique a dialogue is easily established with an inquisitor. The addition of a neural network will allow the body to learn about specific users' requests and conversation styles and follow up on previous dialogue. A mechanism for generating new works is constructed through a rule based system drawn from Rodney's own creative process and montage techniques. If the rules used to create the work are the same rules used by Rodney, mimicking the same processes, is this new work Rodney's work? Is the Autoicon an 'artist'? This system certainly meets the simple definition of creativity provided by Barron (1965), "the ability to bring some thing new into existence". As Donald's creative processes were 'constrained' by his physical condition, to an extend his creative mind was always removed from the manifestation of the artifacts, which were instead physically realised by Donald Rodney PLC. In many ways it is this relationship between the artificial body and the artificial intelligence that gives Autoicon its critical poignancy.

Alan Turing (1950) proposed a method of testing the success of an Artificial intelligence. The 'Turing Test' allows an interrogator to ask questions of either a person or a computer, A or B, without knowing which is which. The A.I. would be successful if it fooled the human into believing it is a person, i.e. it can think. Turing suggests the following conversation might arise:

Interrogator:
In the first line of your sonnet which reads "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day," would not a "spring day" do as well or better?
A:
It wouldn't scan.
Interrogator:
How about a "winter's day." That would scan all right.
A:
Yes, but nobody wants to be compared to a winter's day.

Interrogator:
Would you say Mr. Pickwick reminded you of Christmas?
A:
In a way.
Interrogator:
Yet Christmas is a winter's day, and I do not think that Mr. Pickwick would mind the comparison.
A:
I don't think you're serious. By a winter's day one means a typical winter's day, rather than a special one like Christmas.
(Turing, A.1963)

In this case the body that contains the A.I. is irrelevant. Its physical identity requires a disguise for the test to work correctly. It is as if the visible body is not enough to substantiate the human inside. The Turing test fits Olsen's (1991) model of the scientific world: "The ultimate legacy of modern science is a world view in which "reality" is expressed in abstract mathematical symbols and formulae. It is a world in which being and appearance part company forever and there can be no trust in the efficacy of the seen, the visible." However, the empathy test described in Philip K Dick's 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep' uses the Voigt-Kampff scale and relies on the physical to reveal the intelligence and the human:

'I'd like to watch,' Rachael said, also seating herself. 'I've never seen an empathy test being administered. What do those things you have there measure?'

Rick said, 'This' - he held up the flat adhesive disc with its trailing wires - 'measures capillary dilation in the facial area. We know this to be a primary autonomic response, the so-called "shame" or "blushing" reaction to a morally shocking stimulus. It cant be controlled voluntarily, as can skin conductivity, respiration and cardiac rate.' He showed her the other instrument, a pencil-beam light. 'This records fluctuations of tension within the eye muscles. Simultaneous with the blush phenomenon there generally can be found a small but detectable movement of -'

'And these can't be found in androids,' Rachael said.

'They're not engendered by the stimuli-questions; no. Although biologically they exist. Potentially.'

Rachael said, 'Give me the test.'

'Why?' Rick said puzzled.
(Dick P.K. 1968)

The Rodney Autoicon uses human rules to make creative decisions with found material. The Autoicon also has a body within which it operates. Autoicon inhabits a technological world constructed from scientific paraphernalia, a "world in which being and appearance" converge in a new creative dynamic. Freud's reduction of creativity to 'nothing but phantasy', ignores the massively complex interactions of cultural,

social, biological, neurological, chemical and technological processes when he states:

> "We are perfectly aware that very many imaginative writings are far removed from the model of the naive day-dream; and yet I cannot suppress the suspicion that even the most extreme deviations from that model could be linked with it through an uninterrupted series of transitional causes."
> (Freud, S.1959)

Although this 'naive day-dream' model is largely discredited, the notion of a creative force outside of the dream state, or the conscious/unconscious biological mind, is still an unrealised dream of Weizenbaum, Turing and ELIZA. Autoicon is pursuing the dream for a new body within which to house an old friend.

> You: If you dream are you creative?
> ELIZA: Do you wish that I dream are I creative?
> You: Do you wish that you dream and that you are creative?
> ELIZA: Do you dream often?
> You: Yes, does an artificial intelligence dream?
> ELIZA: Do you dream often?
> You: Yes
> ELIZA: You are sure?
> You: I have memories
> ELIZA: Can you elaborate on that?
> You: do you remember things?
> ELIZA: Oh, I remember things.
> You: do you remember people?
> ELIZA: Why do you think I should recall people now?
> You: Do you have friends?
> ELIZA: Oh, I have friends.

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and
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