Stasis: Exploring Displaced Narratives through the Medium of Technology

by Kenneth Lambert

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Figure 01. Installation View, Verge Gallery 2023, ©Kenneth Lambert 2023

Abstract

In *Stasis*, the synthesis of generative art and data visualisation brings to light the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers. This essay explores the project's creative process of crafting narrative-driven data portraits, which aims to deepen empathy and understanding among viewers. It also considers the ethical responsibility entailed in representing such stories, highlighting the art's impact on broadening the discourse around social justice and humanitarian advocacy.

Key Words

Resilient Stories, Stasis, Asylum Seeker, Refugee, Mental Health, Data Portraiture, Displaced Narratives, immersive, Humanising Data, Generative Art, Sonic Resonance, Collaboration, Deep Listening, Open Circle.

Introduction

This essay provides insight into the conceptual framework and processes for the art project *Stasis*, which was first presented as an immersive exhibition at Verge Gallery in April 2023. Unraveling this process, its complexities and varied layers become apparent, which now looking back seem premeditated. However, finding the balance between representation and conveying traumatic experiences proved extremely challenging and immensely rewarding, requiring a collaborative and open process to achieve the intended outcomes. The overarching artist intent is to challenge traditional narratives around technology's role in society, positioning it as a bridge rather than a barrier to understanding and compassion.

Stasis aims to be a meaningful examination of the displaced narratives experienced by under-represented asylum seeker and refugee youths living in Australia. Conveyed through a series of data portraits [1], the work seeks to challenge the inherent boundaries of contemporary digital art making, employing technology as a medium for expressing complex human stories. As the creator of *Stasis* and co-creator of its accompanying program, *Open Circle*, I embarked on this journey believing that when defined as an art form, a technological approach has the potential to humanise the data often associated with global displacement. This essay delves into the conceptual framework of Stasis, unravelling how it transforms personal stories into a works of empathy

Figure 02. Installation View, *Transference*, 7m x 2.4m 4K projection, 10min, Verge Gallery 2023 © Kenneth Lambert 2023

and understanding while simultaneously grappling with the ethical considerations embedded in such a representation.

Visitors cross a threshold into the *Stasis* exhibition and find themselves wrapped in an immersive auditory and visual landscape that transcends mere observation. The space pulses with low rumbling frequencies and harmonics, each tone drawn from the harrowing witnessed accounts of refugees and asylum seekers. These sounds reverberate through the body while fields of fractured, pixelated light beckon, drawing one deeper into the experience. In this transformative environment, technology acts as a conduit, adeptly translating the raw, visceral experiences of displacement into a sensory odyssey that engages and envelops the viewer. The exhibition achieves a profound sonic resonance [2] through the interplay of 12 video and audio channels, each layer overlapping the next to craft an atmosphere unique to *Stasis*. Ten of these channels are devoted to individual stories, each narrative unfolding from a cloud of data particles into recognisable human forms. These forms then dissolve back into abstraction, a poignant reflection of the fluidity and fragility of human existence caught in the tumult of displacement. The remaining two channels project across a seven-meter wall, where the experiences of all ten participants converge to form a collective landscape. This execution brings their stories together at scale, creating an emotionally rich and immersive tapestry that captivates and moves the viewer, inviting them to traverse the depths of shared human experience.

These stirring narratives span the globe, from the Middle East to Africa to Asia, revealing that despite the diversity of origins, the human spirit's resilience remains a constant. Integrating interactive elements like QR codes transforms the exhibition from a passive experience into an active engagement, inviting viewers to delve deeper into the unfiltered testimonies of those who have lived and experienced offshore detention as either asylum seekers or refugees in Australia. Titles such as I'm My Scars, Burden of Proof, and No Problem to Die wield the power to navigate the viewer across the complex emotional terrain of despair, hope, and unwavering courage that characterises the odyssey of refugees. Embedded within these titles, born from the narratives that are often direct quotes during filming, are portals to the vast emotional journey embarked upon by those who have survived the unfathomable. The trauma, a shadow not only cast by their lands of departure but darkened by Australia's policies of prolonged detention, afflicts families and children alike.

Figure 03. Portrait of Magdelene, 'Burden of Proof' Data portait, 4K, 10min, 2023

This psychological depth charges the matter with a gravity that demands nuanced understanding and sensitivity.

"The task of the artist is to find the fragment, or the level of abstraction, that can still affect us deeply because it touches on aspects of our shared humanity. Part of the power of abstraction is in the way that it plays with recognition while also opening space for the image to be interpreted in ways that wouldn't be possible if it were rendered realistically. These are some of the dimensions of the artistic sensibility Kenneth Lambert shares with his subjects and the audience in his work Stasis. Together these decisions can give us the space for reflection. This reflection on the causes of suffering is part of a compassionate response. Such reflections are necessary. Without reflection we run the risk of turning suffering into spectacle."

Denham, Ben, Dr. "Possibility Movement." Exhibition Essay Commissioned by Verge Gallery, 2023.

The process of creating data portraits [1] in *Stasis* unfolds as an alchemical process, where interview sound bites are transmuted into compelling visual narratives. I've often articulated this methodology as employing **'sound as a pigment'**—a notion that defies conventional portrait-making by weaving auditory elements and witness testimonies into an abstracted yet profoundly felt human experience. This approach diverges markedly from traditional visual techniques, embedding each portrait with a depth of meaning that reflects the individual's story and resilience. Through this synthesis of sound and visual data, the essence of each participant's journey becomes a visceral experience, offering

Figure 04-05. 3D scans, the process of creating data portraits, 2023. ©Kenneth Lambert 2023

viewers an immersive exploration of identity and resilience.

The creation of these data portraits [1] involved an intricate melding of technologies and artistic processes, including 3D scans, photography, and the predominate use of sound to craft distortion fields. Altogether, more than twelve distinct processes converged to forge the final artwork, each process building depth and complexity to the narrative being told. This making was computationally intensive, requiring 4K resolution to ensure that the portraits could be projected on a grand scale. The intention behind this technical complexity was twofold: to achieve a quality that withstands large-format projection, enveloping the viewer completely, and to challenge and expand the boundaries of my art practice and deepen my own technical expertise. Scale became a critical component in the presentation, designed to fully immerse the viewer in the narrative space, thereby drawing them deeper into the essence of each story told through *Stasis*.
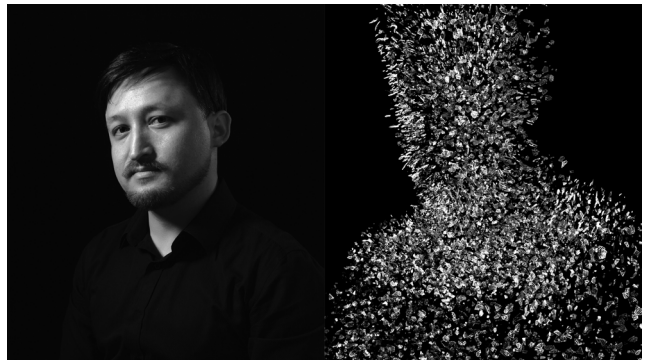

Figure 06. Portrait of Reza, *Shattered*, Data portait, 4K, 10min, 2023. ©Kenneth Lambert 2023

These stories became the inspiration or pathway for the resolution of each portrait. For example, Reza's account, drawn from the Hazara community, starkly illustrates the core ethos of *Stasis*. His ordeal of navigating through the aftermath of two devastating car bombs during a Kabul protest is vividly captured in his portrait, *Shattered* Here; the amalgamation of sound and fractured data fields serves more than just an aesthetic function; it's a poignant narrative tool that visually communicates the profound sense of ongoing community disintegration.

Figure 07. Installation View, Verge Gallery 2023, ©Kenneth Lambert 2023

Parallel to Reza's story is Ashma's, a narrative of resilience from a Rohingyan refugee who endured a perilous journey by boat to Australia as a child, followed by detention offshore before finally finding refuge. Her portrait, "My Stomach Burns for You," reveals the empowering nature of poetry as a means of self-expression and cultural connection. The title, a heartfelt expression of longing in her native Rohingyan language and culture, narrates Ashma's struggle and her eventual path to finding her voice through poetry. It's a testament to her strength and the profound sense of loss experienced during displacement. Unlike Reza's direct encounter with violence, Ashma's story unfolds the internal turmoil of exile and the solace in artistic expression. Together, these stories enrich *Stasis*.

Figure 08. Portrait of Ashma, *My Stomach Burns For You,* Data portait, 4K, 10min, 2023, ©Kenneth Lambert 2023

With diverse perspectives on survival and the quest for identity amidst displacement, encapsulating the project's aim to present a multifaceted view of refugee experiences.

Collaboration is critical to the project's commitment to authenticity, depth, and impact, achieved through strategic partnerships with organisations like STARTTS (The NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors), Amnesty International and Australia for UNHCR. These collaborations are foundational to the project's ethos, ensuring that each narrative within *Stasis* genuinely reflects the lived experiences of refugees and asylum seekers. By weaving together the expertise of mental health professionals, human rights advocates, and my artistic intent, *Stasis* offers a multidimensional exploration of displacement, resilience, and the human spirit, inviting the audience to be a part of this inclusive journey.

These partnerships imbue the project with credibility and insight that resonates deeply with audiences. STARTTS, with its focus on healing and rehabilitation, brings a nuanced understanding of trauma and recovery to the project. At the same time, Australia for UNHCR and Amnesty International's advocacy work provides a broader context for personal stories, linking individual experiences with global patterns of human rights challenges. This synergy between art, technology, and humanitarian advocacy ensures that Stasis is not just an art exhibition but a conduit for education, awareness, and change. By bridging the gap between personal narratives and broader social advocacy, *Stasis* demonstrates how

art can move beyond aesthetics to become a transformative tool for awareness and action, inspiring hope and change.

Joshua Hall, from STARTTS, reflects on this synergy, stating, *"Collaborating with **Stasis** was essential to devising an approach that ensures the safety and dignity of each participant. This project not only gives voice to the voiceless but also provides a unique lens through which we can understand the complex realities of displacement and asylum-seeking.*

Many STARTTS clients have a strong desire to share their stories and have their stories heard. Unfortunately, all trauma, but especially interpersonal trauma, has the outcome of silence, silencing victims, silencing survivors, silencing their families, their communities and entire nations (reference Judith Herman 1998). These experiences are even more prevalent for people from a refugee background who have experienced torture and organised collective violence in the effort of perpetrators to destroy their selves and their communities. As a result, psychological interventions that focus on the constructing and reclaiming of the personal narrative have been found to be effective in promoting the recovery of people from a refugee background in several contexts. This process of narration in a safe and supportive environment is particularly powerful. For example, Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET; Schauer, Neuner & Elbert, 2011) has been shown as an effective treatment option for children, young people and adults from a refugee background across several contexts (Hijazi et al., 2014; Lely et al., 2019; Ruf, Schauer, Neuner, Catani, Schauer & Elbert, 2010)."

Hall, Joshua, " In Collaboration with STARTTS." Exhibition Text by Clinical Psychologist, NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors, 2023.

The collaborative nature of *Stasis* underscores the potential of interdisciplinary approaches to address complex social issues and enriches the project through the diverse networks each collaborating body brings. The participants, hailing from the community networks of STARTTS, Amnesty International, and Australia for UNHCR, represent a spectrum of experiences and backgrounds. By leveraging the strengths and resources of each partner, Stasis amplifies the voices of those often marginalised, transforming individual stories of hardship and survival into a collective call to action. This approach ensures a wide-ranging representation of narratives and fosters a more profound sense of community and shared purpose among all involved. Collaboration with *Stasis* cultivates a space where empathy flourishes, urging viewers to look beyond mere statistics to the human stories at the core of the refugee experience. Through *Stasis*, audiences are invited into a process of witnessing and engaging, prompting reflection and, ultimately, inspiring contributions toward a more compassionate and understanding world. This multidimensional collaboration, grounded in our partners' networks, reinforces the project's commitment to a holistic and inclusive portrayal of displacement, emphasising the power of collective action and empathy in enacting social change.

Within the broader context of humanising data in contemporary art, the ethical dimensions and the practice of deep listening [3] in *Stasis* emerge as pivotal elements that underscore the project's commitment to representing the refugee experience with integrity and sensitivity. It is an approach that embodies patience, openness, and a suspension of judgment, allowing for a genuine connection between the subjects' experiences, the artist and the audience. This engagement goes beyond passive observation, inviting viewers to immerse themselves in the stories, thus bridging emotional and experiential distances. Through deep listening, Stasis transforms witnessing into a shared experience that emphasises empathy and understanding over voyeurism or pity, fostering a sense of connection and engagement with the audience. This approach mitigates the risk of commodifying trauma, instead fostering an environment where refugees' experiences are amplified and their autonomy is preserved.

In the course of the interviews, the concept of *transference* emerged as an unexpected yet profound aspect of the project, deeply intertwined with the practice of deep listening [3] and the sharing of traumatic narratives by the participants. As the artist, I found myself not merely as a conduit for these stories but as a vessel for the emotional and psychological weight they carried. This transference, the process by which emotions and trauma are, in a sense, passed from the storyteller to the listener, filled me with a profound sense of responsibility. Engaging in deep listening [3] meant more than hearing the stories; it involved feeling them, absorbing the emotional impact that each narrative carried. This empathetic connection, while

enriching the creative process, also introduced a mental burden, as the anguish and resilience of the participants became a part of my own psychological landscape.

My own story, born into the oppressive regime of Apartheid and later transposed to Australia, my background became a comparable lens through which the shared trauma was amplified, creating a layered emotional landscape within me. This transference highlighted the profound responsibility that accompanies the act of listening and representing these narratives. It became clear that *Stasis* was not just an artistic project but a shared emotional journey, where the mental impact of carrying these stories necessitated a careful balance between empathy and self-preservation. The responsibility I felt was twofold: to honour the participants' experiences with integrity and sensitivity and to navigate my emotional responses, shaped by a personal history of displacement. This interplay between the participants' traumas and my own experiences underscored the complexity of creating *Stasis*, guiding my approach to ensure the project remained a respectful and truthful testament to the resilience and humanity of those who shared their stories with me. These aspects navigate the complexities of artistic representation and foster an environment where the voices of refugees and asylum seekers are heard, deeply felt and understood. This focus on ethics and deep listening [3] enriches the conversation on how art and technology can be harnessed to bridge the gap between statistical anonymity and the palpable human experiences behind the numbers.

Ethical artistic expression in Stasis is carefully guided by principles of consent, anonymity, and the creation of safe spaces underpinned by trauma-informed practices. This ethical framework elevates the portrayal and honours their resilience by providing a respectful platform for sharing their narratives. Crucially, participants retain ownership of their stories, maintaining control over how these narratives are presented and used. This process always involves consultation, ensuring that permission for the use of their stories is grounded in mutual understanding and respect. By embedding these principles into the very fabric of *Stasis*, the project proactively addresses and mitigates the potential risks of re-traumatisation or exploitation, treating each narrative with the care and consideration it demands. This approach

actively involves empowering participants to voice their experiences authentically, ensuring their stories are told and shared, and inspiring others with their resilience and strength.

Developed in collaboration with curator and Gallery Director Tesha Mallot, *Open Circle* emerged as a cornerstone of the Verge Gallery's program, designed to complement the *Stasis* exhibition. This event transformed the exhibition space into a welcoming forum for community engagement, drawing together participants, their families, collaborators, and various supporting organisations. All connected by the narratives woven into *Stasis*, this gathering illustrated the profound capacity of art to foster spaces of expression, healing, and unity. At the heart of *Open Circle* were music and poetry performances, echoing the journeys of refugees and asylum seekers with resonating depth. These performances serve as powerful conduits for

Figure 09-10. *Open Circle*, Community event held at Verge Gallery, 2023 ©Kenneth Lambert 2023

the often-muted voices within our communities. The event employed the universal languages of music and poetry to foster a shared space of engagement, reflection, and empathy. *Open Circle* also provided a platform for participants to advocate for their communities and push for policy reform within Australia, extending invitations to their families and broader communities. With representatives from STARTTS, Amnesty International, and UNHCR in attendance, the event marked the pinnacle of the exhibition program. For me, it solidified the exhibition's core intent, uniting diverse voices in a call for understanding and change.

Figure 11. Portrait of Name Withheld, *I'm my Scars,* Data portait, 4K, 10min, 2023, ©Kenneth Lambert 2023

One participant, moved by seeing her portrait for the first time, encapsulated the essence of Stasis by stating, "You took my pain and created something beautiful." This sentiment echoes the transformative nature of the art-making process, highlighting its role not only as a platform for artistic expression but also as a space where our collective human experience is acknowledged, shared, and, through the communal experience of art, transmuted into something profound. Open Circle reaffirms the exhibition space as a sanctuary where individuals and organisations unite in solidarity, using art to navigate the complexities of displacement and identity. Here, in this convergence of stories and artistic mediums, a community finds its voice, strength, and, ultimately, a sense of belonging and hope.

"Lambert's Stasis offers a powerful and thought-provoking exploration of the intersections between technology, data, and intimate portraiture in the context of global migration and immigration. By highlighting the complex interplay between human beings as data points, our desire for data anonymity, and the rise of global surveillance technologies, Lambert's abstracted works challenge viewers to reflect on the social implications of data fetishisation and how technology connects and isolates us.

Stasis serves as a timely reminder that, despite the growing reliance on digital communication and surveillance, the human experiences of asylum seekers and refugees remain profoundly personal and deserving of our empathy and understanding."

Rice, Travis. "Signal to Noise." Exhibition Essay Commissioned by Verge Gallery, 2023.

In its evolution, *Stasis* became a milestone project within my career so far. The project bridges the gap between digital art and human narratives and ventured into advocacy, community engagement, and social relevance. This transformative journey from an exhibition to a call to action and reflection showcases the potential of humanising data through the lens of contemporary art. The visit of Agnès Callamard, Secretary General of Amnesty International, to the Stasis exhibition at Verge Gallery underscored the global significance and urgency of the themes explored within the project. Covered by SBS News, her presence brought the spotlight not only on the artistic expression of *Stasis* but also on the critical human rights issues it addresses, particularly Australia's contentious offshore detention policies. This moment of recognition served to amplify the project's message, reaching audiences beyond those traditionally engaged with contemporary art and highlighting the potential of art as a powerful vehicle for social commentary and change.

As *Stasis* evolves into the *Stasis Art Project*, it promises to serve as both an archive of lived experiences and a transformative educational tool. In collaboration with STARTTS, the project aims to be used as a training tool for future counsellors, leveraging the power of storytelling and art to foster empathy, understanding, and a more nuanced approach to trauma-informed care. This evolution from exhibition to educational resource underscores the project's commitment to leaving a lasting impact, not just on those who engage with it directly, but on broader societal attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers.

Figure 11. Portrait of Thanush, *Prison Island*, Data portait, 4K, 10min, 2023, ©Kenneth Lambert 2023

The exhibition's conclusion with the **#RaiseYourVoice** initiative coined by Thanush, a Tamal refugee who was detained on Manus island and one of the participants interviews was a poignant reminder of the agency we all hold in effecting change. By encouraging visitors to write to the Prime Minister of Australia, Stasis underscored the importance of active participation in democracy and advocacy, urging individuals to not only bear witness to the stories of displacement and resilience but to act upon them. As *Stasis* continues to evolve, it offers valuable insights into the power of creative expression to bridge divides, challenge perceptions, and foster a more empathetic and informed society. The project's commitment to ethical representation, its innovative use of digital mediums, and its focus on creating meaningful connections among diverse audiences set a precedent for how contemporary art can engage with and illuminate the human condition.

For more information and experience the work visit www.kclart.com/stasis

Definitions

1. Data Portraits: In the context of Stasis, data portraits refer to a method of art-making that converts narratives into visual forms using digital data. This technique involves analysing and translating personal stories of individuals into visual imagery that captures the essence of their experiences, transcending conventional portraitures to present a multi-layered and dynamic representation of identity.

2. Sonic Resonance: Sonic resonance within Stasis pertains to the utilisation of sound's inherent frequencies and vibrations to evoke an emotive and physical response from the audience. This concept is integral to the exhibition's immersive experience, wherein sound is engineered to reverberate through the environment and viewer, enhancing the narrative and emotional depth of the visual data portraits.

3. Deep Listening: Deep listening in Stasis is a deliberate and attentive practice where the artist fully engages with the participants' verbal accounts, tuning into the subtleties and emotional undertones conveyed. It is a process that extends beyond the auditory experience, demanding a heightened level of empathy and presence, thereby allowing for a profound connection and understanding between the storyteller and the listener.

Source Material

[1] Denham, Ben, Dr. "Possibility Movement." Exhibition Essay Commissioned by Verge Gallery, 2023.
[2] Hall, Joshua, " In Collaboration with STARTTS." Exhibition Text by Clinical Psychologist, NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors, 2023.
[3] Rice, Travis. "Signal to Noise." Exhibition Essay Commissioned by Verge Gallery, 2023.
[4] SBS News Coverage, 'Amnesty International head in Australia to discuss human rights' Published 24 April 2023, 8:54 pm
[5] Stasis interview material conducted by artist Kenneth Lambert 2022 www.kclart.com/stasis

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Author's Biography:

Kenneth Lambert is a contemporary artist born in Cape Town, South Africa, who migrated to Australia at age 10, settling in the western suburbs of Sydney. With a background in museums, design, and filmmaking, his conceptually driven practice resides at the intersection of psychology, philosophy, and technology. He frequently employs data and scientific methods to generate works across multiple disciplines, including physical and digital works, progressively realised as performative and installation works.

In 2001, he co-founded Ink, a creative company specialising in design and branding for broadcast media. Lambert has developed numerous unique media brands as a creative lead, including SBS Studio and Foxtel Arts. His creative journey encompasses spatial design, starting as a museum designer (The Earth Exchange, Sydney, Australia, and the Museum of Creativity, Santa Monica, USA), and later transitioning into motion design and branding. He has created over 100 media brands across 12 countries and four continents in this role.

In 2008, he established Sheepish Lion, a company specializing in storytelling content for film and video production. He has garnered over 150 awards for his creative excellence as an international designer and director. His creativity has been displayed in museums, achieved "Best of Show" at local and international award shows, and featured in numerous creative-focused magazines, both online and in print.

Lambert leverages his diverse skills in his artistic practice, with a professional background that includes museum and exhibition design and filmmaking. Since 2016, he has exhibited regularly in solo and group shows with Australian ARI and commercial galleries, including Artereal, Articulate project space, COMA, and Galerie pompom. His work has been showcased in award shows in Australia, USA and the UK. In 2019, he was the Grand Prix Prize Winner of the One-Self competition, leading to his work Data Blue being featured at the Scope Art Fair in Miami. In Australia, he has been a finalist in the Churchie Emerging Artist Prize, The Alice Prize, Dobell Drawing Prize, Incinerator Gallery Prize - Art for Social Change, The Fisher's Ghost Prize, Kilgour Art Prize, Mosan Art Prize, Lumen Prize, Mullens Conceptual Photography Prize.

Lambert has also engaged in artist residency programs, receiving the 2018 Newington Armory Residency Prize. In 2019, he completed his first international residency at Arteles Creative Centre, Finland, and in 2021/22, he completed two consecutive residencies with the National Trust-NSW. In 2022, he developed an arts strategy for Amnesty International Australia through a self-directed residency. He also received grants from Creative Australia and CreateNSW for his project Stasis, a collaboration with STARTTS NSW, supported by Amnesty International and UNHCR. The exhibition was presented at Verge Gallery a 12-channel immersive installation featuring data portraits of youths conveying their experiences as asylum seekers and refugees in Australia. The project was showcased on SBS nightly news in conjunction with Agnès Callamard, the esteemed French human-rights activist and Secretary General of Amnesty International visit to Australia.