

FIRST PLINTH

PUBLIC ART AWARD WINNER 19/20

FABIO LATTANZI ANTINORI

Introducing Antinori by Isabel de Vasconcellos, author and curator

There is something exciting and transformative about a sculptor's first public commission. It heralds a shift in gear, providing the artist with the tools to extend their ambitions, flex their creative muscles, and reach new and exciting audiences. People who, whether by inclination or a sense of exclusion, do not ordinarily "go to" art, find art coming to them.

In the case of Fabio Lattanzi Antinori's playful and thought-provoking First Plinth commission, they will discover it on the Old Brompton Road, set against the Flemish-style fandangles of Dora House, and beside the flickering price masts of the Shell petrol station next door. Or they will come by it as they wander along the canal in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, relaxing on a day off, or on their way to the shopping and athletics centres nearby.

The Cost of Your Words is inspired by the kind of billboards commonly found along motorways or other large public spaces, but also by the transformation of São Paulo following the Clean City Law (2007), prohibiting advertising. The removal of content from the thousands of billboards that punctuated the city left behind a series of empty frames, strangely sculptural and assertive, places of potential once again.

Many of Antinori's works are data driven, using either archives and databases (e.g. stock exchange forecasts and official statistics, or records of flash crashes and dark pools) or real time data feeds, to unpeel the mechanisms driving and transforming our commonly accepted notions of reality. In works such as *Astral Charts: The LSE and The Capital Standard*, he has set forecasts by economists alongside those of financial astrologers and Seju practitioners (Korean shamanic fortune tellers), commenting on the blind faith we put on data as a measure of value and stability, but also as a predictive tool, underlining the tension between available knowledge and the lengths we go to, to "make sense" of the world. In *Masters and Slaves*, he has used the financial data from flash crashes (sudden and hard to explain devaluations in stock prices) of Facebook and Google to lay bare the accelerated processes by which human systems have become enmeshed with the machinations of technologies it's becoming increasingly impossible fully to understand, let alone control.

In Antinori's words, the purpose of *The Cost of Your Words* is partly "to make a piece that is an ad, but is not": using the frame of the advertisement to show the workings behind it. In particular, the way that the language we use in our digital lives is appropriated by future predictive algorithms to forecast what we might buy based on our tastes, interests and purchase history. This data then feeds into the valuation of individual terms (keywords), the price of which is determined depending on how likely it is to drive viewers to the clients paying to use them.

FIRST PLINTH: Public art award

First Plinth is designed to offer sculptors an opportunity to extend their practice into competing for public art commissions. The winning sculptor is awarded £10,000 towards the cost of producing a large-scale sculpture which is exhibited on our sculpture terrace at Dora House. It then transfers to Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

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In the work, a series of LED screens announces the price of different words in real time, tracking their prevalence and fluctuations through a live feed from Google Adwords, which is constantly updating the value of key terms that visitors to the surrounding area will use in their online searches. Antinori has made separate accounts, one for when the work is installed in South Kensington, and another for when it moves to the Olympic Park this winter.

The artist has a longstanding interest in advertising communication: the language but also the profiling mechanisms that identify and determine how a marketing message is to be targeted. His works point out the sinister implications of these powerful agents of manipulation, but also draw out unexpected absurdities in how we read and make sense of visual information. In one of his earliest pieces, *DPS*, random combinations of images and text give rise to apophenia, the cognitive tendency to perceive patterns between unrelated phenomena. The results are often poignant or pedestrian, but the work rings with the comic tingle of the non sequitur. Shorn of context, words become funny but also strange again. This will be an element of *The Cost of Your Words*, where at any one time the display may be proclaiming the cost of South Kensington, sculpture, coffee, education, Westfield, swimming or Kapoor, in terms of pennies and pounds.

Antinori's practice dramatises and interrogates the increasingly problematic concept of Free Will in a world that has lately been transformed beyond recognition by the creeping ubiquity of data. It provokes us to reflect on the price we have shown ourselves willing to pay for convenience in exchange for our privacy, and unsettles us by pointing to the trade-offs in play. The AI-powered systems which give us the immediate, visible benefit of streamlining our online experience – whether as consumers or in our recreational pursuits – are also codes cast across our lives like an invisible net and tightening around us, click by click.

From within the filter bubble, we still fancy we are free to choose the content we have access to, when in fact the means by which this knowledge arrives to us itself embodies a series of algorithmic processes which are incompatible with such a chaotic – yet ultimately free – relationship to the world of information. And this information – be it in the form of messages or products – is being sold to us as a result of a data economy where our online profile has a value. Whether or not we are comfortable acknowledging the extent to which this is true, unless we take steps to protect our identity, we are being digitally manipulated in all our online interactions.

At the risk of moving into the realm of conspiracy, we would do well to ask whether the masters of our digital data have hidden agendas. Those of us born before this paradigmatic shift can comfort ourselves with the notion of having once known our own minds. But we are already living with the political consequences of mass, targeted manipulation in the shape of democratic outcomes such as Brexit and elections around the world. Post Cambridge Analytica, how sure can any of us be of the freedom of our consumer, political and lifestyle choices now?



The Cost of Your Words, Fabio Lattanzi Antinori

About

The Royal Society of Sculptors

We champion contemporary sculpture and the artists who create it. We are leading the conversation about sculpture today through exhibitions and events for all, welcoming everyone interested in exploring this art form and its many possibilities. An artist-led, membership organisation, the Society supports and connects sculptors throughout their careers.

Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park

Home to the UK's tallest sculpture, the ArcelorMittal Orbit by Sir Anish Kapoor and Cecil Balmond, the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park invites visitors to explore the rich variety of artworks that adorn the Park, inspiring a spirit of creativity and cultural adventure. Our ambitious, diverse art programme reflects the Park's identity as place for people from around the world and around the corner.



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