Interview between Marcus Lyon and Charissa Terranova – 7 June 2021

book: *Art as Social Practice: Technologies for Change*
by editor Judy Walgren

**Charissa Terranova:** So, the first thing I want to talk to you about is your Human Atlas Project and how it coalesces together your work in social justice, leadership roles and your art practice as a photographer. What are the foundations to this work?

**Marcus Lyon:** Right through my career, I have been interested in working on large scale projects... over the last three decades I've worked as a commissioned portrait photographer, but I have also been chairman of several charities that worked with the most disadvantaged children in our global communities - street children - in Latin America and Asia and across the world. What I ended up realizing is that I could bring these two streams of my life together: the artistic and the social justice. I saw that I could create a river out of my work by creating a deep portrait project that explained the spaces in which people are inspired to go to explore how they can serve society in a more powerful way... so, with each Human Atlas, we've created a project built on a nomination structure where we find a large cohort of extraordinary people who are working on social change and then we record their lives through portraits, DNA and sound. By bringing these three pillars of identity together, we can tell a deeper story about who we are and how we can both self-author and co-author a more hopeful future.

**Charissa Terranova:** So, the Human Atlas is an as an open-ended project?

**Marcus Lyon:** Yes. It all began in Brazil. I'm married to Bel, a Brazilian, and we have a couple of ‘Brazenglish’ children. We saw that we had this opportunity to explore the country of our growing family. So, we took our two pre-school kids to travel all over Brazil and record the lives and deeper narratives of over 100 remarkable change agents across the country in the first Atlas of a Nation – *Somos Brasil*, launched in 2016.
We found that the project caught so many people's imaginations. We started getting calls asking us to create new Human Atlas Projects. Initially we created a project in Israel called Aliyah, exploring a group of nominated Israeli Scientists with powerful migration stories with the Smithsonian Institution in DC. Next, there was a commission by the Danish foundation Momondo to create a Human Atlas on any European country. I chose Germany and made a project called WE: deutschland, published in 2018.

Then The Kresge Foundation in Detroit rang me to ask if I would make an Atlas on the City of Detroit. A three-year project that we launched in 2020.

Currently we're working on potential Human Atlases in Houston, Silicon Valley, and we are in discussions with the Getty Museum to make one on Los Angeles.

Charissa Terranova: Where does the work reside – is it on permanent display?

Marcus Lyon: All three of the completed Atlases are published in limited edition book format.

Somos Brasil has exhibited in China, Australia, Europe and Brasil and is held in the permanent collection at the Smithsonian. WE: deutschland exhibited in Germany.

There is also a bespoke website, www.ahumanatlas.com where all the DNA, sound and image content from the projects can be accessed democratically by anyone across the globe.

Detroit was launched during the pandemic, which put our initial exhibition plans on hold. So, we're currently working with the Kresge Foundation to see how we can bring that back as an exhibition in Detroit. My hope for the future is for us to build significant exterior projection mapping events around the work – telling the story to as broad an audience as possible.
In addition, the project’s content and methodology will be integrated into a Honors university degree program at Wayne State University (WSU).

Also, the final 100 sound files created for the project have been donated to the archives at the Stephen O. Murray and Keelung Hong Special Collections at Michigan State University (MSU) Libraries.

And finally, we are in the early stages of transferring the i.Detroit data and a copyright license to the Detroit Historical Museum. In that sense, all the material and information we have produced and collated, will be available for future generations to access and study.

**Charissa Terranova**: I like this approach - it's much more democratic to have the work held this way – especially the wider technological engagement.

So, tell me about your team and the people that you work with?

**Marcus Lyon**: I've got a core team Camila Pastorelli, a super experienced producer, and a highly skilled photojournalist in her own right and Joe Briggs-Price, a wonderful photographer / videographer and sound recordist.

We also work super closely with graphic designer Jim Sutherland to build the whole graphic identity and structure to the projects. Jim also leads on the book and exhibition design. Additionally, we have key relationships with map makers, DNA analysts, app builders and sound engineers. It’s a large team.

When we look at the whole piece, from nomination, production through to publication, the building of these projects involves upwards of 250 people, all who have played a key role in helping to deliver a final piece that is not only powerful and authentic but a work of real co-creation.
**Charissa Terranova:** In terms of medium, what I'm most fascinated with about with the Human Atlas as social practice, is the role of documentary. The process feels like a very specific genre.

Documentary photography has been appropriated within conceptual art over recent decades - from the 60s, 70s and to the present day.

What is your relationship to documentary photography?

**Marcus Lyon:** That is a great question. Obviously, I grew up with traditional documentary photography as the backdrop to my early life. I was totally fascinated by traditional black and white reportage - *The Family of Man* catalogue of Edward Steichen’s groundbreaking exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955 was my north star. Jane Bown’s *The Gentle Eye* publication from the early 1980s were the images that inspired me to be a portrait photographer.

However, I never really felt that traditional black and white photographic reportage work was where I wanted to explore – especially in the 21st century. I always liked the research and wrote notes to aid traditional captioning, but I never felt I could really transfer enough information with just a caption. I sensed an opportunity, a need, to find alternative ways to explore stories visually and find a deeper understanding of who we are, hence the use of DNA and sound.

Photographically my imagery, and the process of making portraits, is incredibly focused on the authentic person. As I've got older and perhaps more confident in what I'm trying to say, my portraits have become simpler.

With my Human Atlas images, I try to create perfect representations of the person I meet. That way when the audience engages with the portrait, they are meeting the person - that is my role – to introduce you to this person and for the person, the portrait not to be your chattel. You do not own them, you do not judge them, you get to know them, listen to them and truly appreciate them.
Additionally, the sound and DNA play a critical role. I like to think of them as adding three dimensions to the work. An X, Y and Z axis, a three-dimensional portrait. The portrait is the present, the DNA the past, and the soundscape is this aspirational journey into the future – the ‘who am I and who can I be’ and ‘who can we be together?’

Charissa Terranova: You have added interactivity to the aesthetic experience of your portraiture. I really like thinking with my students about the history and transformation of portraiture across the ages. In your work, you have most definitely expanded portraiture. How would you consider the role of portraiture in your work – in this sense, as you’re nudging it in a new direction?

Marcus Lyon: I hope so. I wanted to give the audience more. I felt that we lived in a time when we could do that. We didn't have to be limited by two dimensions. I think it was only by exploring and experimenting that I found a way to this space... the triptych of sound, genetics and portraits.

Charissa Terranova: I have a sense that your work is educational. László Moholy-Nagy, the Hungarian Bauhaus photographer, thought photography was exactly what you're doing - perceptual education or enhancement. Where do you think your work fits within this rubric, somewhere between perceptual education and enhancement?

Marcus Lyon: I want to be right in the middle, where I encourage the audience to deeply listen, to really connect. We live in increasingly polarized times. Across the globe we see so much misinformation – people being drawn into extreme positions - Brazil, America, Germany are all facing huge challenges to find spaces where real dialogue can be a possibility… dialogue that can be harnessed to solve the critical problems of our time: social and racial equality, the climate crisis and our extraordinary levels of environmental destruction. This all connects back into the work I made just before the Human Atlas - my global mass behaviour series, BRICs, Exodus, Timeout, Fuel and Intersection. They looked
at the Anthropocene through the lens of migration and challenged us to see how interconnected we all are.

We're seven and a half billion people. Four billion people have moved or arrived in the cities of our world since I was born in the mid 1960’s. This huge rural, urban migration coupled with the migrations driven by our destructive, extractive economies will increasingly push us in to polarized tribes. I want my work, if it can, to be educational and expansive… warm and engaging, so that all the different audiences that can experience it will build their sense of connection with other human beings. It is key for us to connect with those who are not part of our natural tribes - to realise just how much we share and thus how important it is for us to learn to listen in order to co-create a more equitable future.

Charissa Terranova: Your work is about the poetry of our human complexity - I see your passion… the love of that poetry.

On the one hand, what you're doing is very sociological and academic… but I also see the light and the beauty in all its complexity… and this is what gives the work such depth.

How do you reconcile this dichotomy, between the sociological and academic on the one hand and the aesthetic and beautiful on the other?

Marcus Lyon: One of the things I most love about photography is the fact that it's writing with light. Bringing the artistry of composition together with the science of light. The reaction of these two elements is a beautiful union… in many ways art without science and science without art… that's a world I don't want to live in.

The Human Atlas process through its nomination process and production phase, through to final output, is arduous – we are recording up to 100 life stories. The DNA mapping, the interviews, the portraits can be seen in some senses through a science lens, like a series of experiments. I bring multiple experiments together so that we can look at those the variance and not only see how
interconnected we are but also how stunningly, beautifully unique we are…

It is a really deep-dive process built over three years… A human geography study where we control and contain an extraordinary amount of data to create a final emotional landscape of stories, experiences, hopes, dreams and aspirations.

All this is only possible through this marriage of science and art.

All created like the perfect classroom - a clearly structured and defined space, but inside a place of pure freedom and love to explore.

**Charissa Terranova**: Yes, I agree completely. I think we need that for adults, too, the marriage of art and science conveyed and distributed in an open and welcoming way. We need it desperately. I like the way the work unfolds around something not textual, but visual. Everything comes out of the portraiture.

From my perspective your work is like a film director, overseeing so many different aspects of the work, crafting the projects and collating all the information you're gathering.

What do you think of the idea and what's your connection to film?

**Marcus Lyon**: I have always been fascinated by the purity of the still image. It was where I found my voice. I feel like I owe it a huge amount… It has been my guide and companion... But I do agree with your comparison, these are very large-scale projects that require a firm directorial hand while realising just how much brilliant work comes from my colleagues… It is such a privilege because it means I can bring some extraordinary people together, working with Jim Sutherland on the graphics and Matt Hill on the sound, let alone the chance to work with musicians Brian Eno and Derrick May to create the bespoke 7” single for the final limited edition of the *i.Detroit* book.
Charissa Terranova: You are like László Moholy-Nagy, his vision was very immersive and expansive.

So, I want to talk about i.Detroit, how you ended up there, why Detroit?

Marcus Lyon: Initially the Human Atlas work on Brazil was seen by an elder statesman of the city of Detroit, Mark Davidoff, and he took the Somos Brasil book to Rip Rapson the president of The Kresge Foundation. Rip and his colleague Wendy Jackson immediately saw the potential for the Atlas work to tell the story of those in the city who were leading the most significant change in the neighbourhoods and beyond.

They invited me to the city, and we organized a big community meeting where I presented my ideas to 50 of the key community leaders and activists in the city. Obviously, I got a full grilling about how a middle aged, middle class, white man from England could tell the story of a city that is 80% African American? I pitched back the proposition that the work was all about recording the real voice of a place… they put me through the mill but at the end of it and they said, ‘you know what, Marcus, we love your ideas, how can we help you, how can we make this happen?’

This was such a brilliant introduction to the city… Detroiters live through Michigan winters, they have faced bankruptcy, years of racial injustice, civil unrest and multiple other challenges but they always stand tall and have a real grit about them that gets them through the hardest of times but underneath it all they are seriously decent human beings who will always go the extra mile for their brothers and sisters. With that initial test passed I now had 50 community leaders right behind me, right through the whole process, who stood by us through thick and thin and helped make the whole initiative a huge success.

Charissa Terranova: Detroit is known across the globe most of all for the production of cars. It is a very specific city with a very specific set of historical circumstances that have created the way it looks today from industrial boom to post-industrial wash-out.
Had you been to Detroit before this work and what are your thoughts about the dereliction of Detroit?

**Marcus Lyon:** I had always wanted to go to Detroit. In fact, I pitched a project to go to Detroit in the late 90’s when I won the Agfa Photographer of the Year award, which was grant funding to pursue a personal project. Unfortunately, Agfa did not share my interest in the post-industrial landscape.

So, Detroit was always on my radar; I have a sister who lives in Michigan and Detroit connects to so many of us across the globe through music as well as that fascination with the American urban dream…. with all its imperfections.

What I really found once I began to truly listen was how the story of Detroit is so poorly told through the narrative of what has been called ‘ruin porn’. The story of abandonment is the story those that come to the city and don’t listen tell – the wasteland story.

There are so many more interesting stories to record of the human narratives that explore the real city – stories that are nothing to do with crumbling buildings. If you go to Detroit for a day or two, decline is easy to see but if you dig deeper there is a story of resilience and reinvention, of community building and change that is far more powerful. I think one reason that we landed so well in Detroit and the city got so engaged with the Human Atlas is that we were so determined to tell the true story.

**Charissa Terranova:** As an artist I know you are intrigued by visual infrastructure, so I'm curious to know more about the scale of dereliction and how you saw that story of that city.

**Marcus Lyon:** Detroit was built for two million people, its 139 square miles… the space needed for three cities… today it has a population of 600 humndred thousand. So, the story is less about what was built, but what isn't there – it is a density story in truth - Its lack of density.
Charissa Terranova: All that open space. People are farming there now?

Marcus Lyon: Once again, that farming story is fascinating too, but often framed in the wrong way. The fact that there were no national grocers in the entire city of Detroit until 2013 when Whole Foods opened one small community store in midtown.

Charissa Terranova: So, it was a food desert.

Marcus Lyon: Yes. So, the reality was growing was a fascinating combination of necessity and the fact before the Great Migration the wealth of African Americans now residents in the city had come from the rural South... they came north for industrial jobs, but their origins were more often than not as farmers and agricultural labourers... somewhere in this story is a sense of return to a former skill set.

Charissa Terranova: Is this one of the themes you pursued in the work? How did you choose the individuals featured?

Marcus Lyon: Yes, we featured people who were heavily invested in the urban agriculture revolution but there are 100 people in the book, it's a very broad survey of the city. Our process is to build a cohort of people to feature through a 6-month nomination process... that way we get to create a broad cross section of stories from every part of the city and its diverse communities. We featured extraordinary people working on social justice, water rights, housing, music, entrepreneurship, racial justice, food security, environment, health, literacy and so much more.

Charissa Terranova: It also sounds anthropological. This again brings us back to our earlier discussion of photography as a manifestation of art and science – and humans as individuals and humans as types.

You are materialising identity in this project through photographic portraits, image activated oral histories and ancestral DNA - how do
those three elements create an identity and what kind do they create?

**Marcus Lyon:** The photographic portrait is centre stage – they are super authentic records of the human being featured, and we print them life size. The audience can engage with another human being, they're in a relationship. The sound is built from a half an hour interview, which we condense into a two or three-minute soundscape. These soundscapes are mounted to an image activated app built for each project... swipe your device over the portrait and the portrait then talks to you. The interviews are structure in a very defined way, so they explore the same spaces in each person’s life: early childhood memories and connection to community, and aspirations for the future. It is a past, present and future piece... and then the ancestral DNA maps geographical origins and both maternal and paternal haplogroups - the historical migrations out of Africa across the globe.

The combination of these allows the audiences to build a much more dynamic sense of a person, their past and future. In some ways it is the antithesis of the identity politics of our time as the work encourages us to look deep into our uniqueness and gives a wider sense of the universal nature of the human condition.

**Charissa Terranova:** So, I want to talk to you about the portraiture, the question and definition of portraiture and your use of it.

Historically the exploration of individual in art has been through multiple manifestations. Your work connects to typology, the exploration of the individual, not as a unique human being, but as a specimen. I am interesting to explore where your work fits in here? In one sense the art is empowering, but on the other side typology can be dehumanising. The empowering part in the history of was mostly for the rich and already powerful, while the typological part unfolds really in the history of art-and-science as a kind of barbaric denegation of the humanity of humans.

How do you approach this aspect of the work?
Marcus Lyon: I was initially very influenced by Richard Avedon’s *Travels in the American West* - to use a simple white backdrop on location… and the intention was to create a typology like a science experiment… a search for understanding through collated images created in the same manner. I'm trying to produce a deeply respectful record of a group of human beings exactly as they present themselves to me… to negate exterior judgement… no fancy lighting, no trickery, a standard lens on a large format camera. I'm eye to eye with the person and I don't hide behind my camera. I am absolutely the eyes of the audience when I'm taking that photograph. What I'm looking for is the essence of the human being. I've researched each individual and known for months beforehand who I'm meeting. I want to deeply honour them in a photographic portrait - there's a very fine line I'm running, between a literal record of the person who walked in the room and an inspirational moment where you, the audience can truly witness the person.

Charissa Terranova: Yes, I see that - the history of representation in two dimensional images can be a bad science in certain instances and lends itself to eugenics.

But you aren't doing that at all. You're coming aesthetically out of the mass fact of photography. So, what you've done is recast the old ideas of typology. We live in an information society so your whole aesthetic is about a very clear message out to the world about an individual.

Charissa Terranova: Social practice art has a potential to be too moralising and heavy handed and the art part falls away.

Tell me about this social practice and how you brought together your political science education and art, and the place of morality in your work. What is the location of morality in your work?

Marcus Lyon: I'm a village boy, so I come from a place where you know everybody and see them as equals. You're deeply interconnected with everyone and there's no place to hide in a
village. I think bringing the village into the urban spaces I've spent most of my adult life is a key theme in my life.

In one sense the moral backbone to my practice is the intention for the work to be deeply thoughtful and caring with people… with their portraits, with their interviews, with their DNA… to be super respectful in the representation of another human being with the purpose to share their stories and create an opportunity to connect.

With the Human Atlas work I have found a way to bring the multiple strands of my life to a place where I hope to add real value… combining the experience of three decades of portrait and location work together with the deep research needed in true political science to create legacy work that will pass the test of time… obviously the audience will be the final judge, but so far, the journey has been pure joy… long may it continue.