

AnthropoTechne Art Interview with Agnieszka Jelevska

by Monika Włodzik & Witold Wachowski

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David Krish, who examines how people think (literally) with their bodies and things, said that modern technology makes possible thinking about what has been unthinkable so far. Do you think that this also concerns art and our artistic sensibility? Or is our sensibility more or less the same?

The latest art, the one that I am most interested in, does not happen in a vacuum, in an unidentified container known as the world, as it is described, among others, by Peter Sloterdijk. Such art is interconnected with research processes, new science and technology; thus its aesthetic, intellectual, emotional and processual parameters change. I think that we, as recipients, are equally susceptible to the changing nature and structure of artworks.

Our sensibility, like art, is unavoidably altered by technological tools that significantly modify our ways of experiencing and knowing the world. I agree with Kirsh on this matter. In my opinion, research of this type forces us to redefine artistic practices as well as humanistic discourses.

I have the impression that your book, *Sensorium*, might just as well be “rewritten” in the form of a spectacle that would turn communication into demonstration. Is this a conscious effort on your part?

I rather see the book as a performative network created by chosen phenomena that largely determine one another and remain intertwined. It should be remembered that this is a collection of essays that shows the course of my research directed at linking performative and multimedia arts in heterarchic courses, including philosophy and theories of human cognition. I opened the book with a quotation from Bruno Latour who said that scientific ideas circulate as subjects, objects and discourses, hence networks are full of being. The ANT model has got nothing to do with a spectacle, but it may sometimes involve the performativity of different definitions and actors that create contemporary networks: research disciplines, objects of their research, artworks and the process of their making, artists themselves, scientists or researchers who change their traditional roles and take on new ones. When engineer James Gimzewski, an eminent professor interested in nanoprocesses, and Victoria Vesna, a multimedia artist, show their works described as nanoart, then they and their works redraw the boundaries separating science and art as well as those between a researcher and an artist.

It can be seen as one of the hallmarks of your book that you show and define relations between art, science and philosophy, while avoiding to create hierarchies that follow the dynamics of scientist=researcher, work of art=object of inquiry, philosophy=distanced commentary. Which of these interrelations, in your opinion, renders it impossible to define them according to the dichotomy of subject-object (though we may, of course, do so in everyday life)?

I believe that it is connected with the network model that I adopted in the book. This model seeks not to separate but to include; it is based on the movement that does not allow for using outdated definitions and divisions. Stephen Wilson, who has been writing on the relations between science and art for many years, repeatedly emphasises that artistic activity about contemporary issues is often similar to laboratory work, while the achievements of a scientist or an engineer are often founded on the creativity and innovation of their approach. This is extremely important, as the harder we try to separate art, science and technology, the wider cognitive and cultural cracks we will have to deal with. If contemporary art, as Wilson suggests, is to engage in civilisational processes, it should keep track of the current changes, it should try to understand these shifts and deconstruct them.

Can we say that something has ended, stopped or died in art? Maybe all the changes are positive and it makes no sense to miss anything? More than a century ago, Aleksei Gastev, whom you quoted, provoked something that seems to be the starting point of multimedia art.

I don't think that we can talk about art in general. There is a multitude of excellent and outstanding artists who paint or sculpt. Their topics change, but the medium they use evolves rather than disappears. From my point of view, it is important to notice and appreciate a whole galaxy of phenomena incorporated in modern art. If we accepted the assumption, made by many, that art ended with Modernism, we would exclude such phenomena as installation, performance art or later bioart and nanoart. We tend to forget that these artistic practices grew out of most contemporary issues connected with technoculture and science. This art is not *in plus*, just as technology and scientific research should not be conceptualised in unambiguously positive and superficial terms. I would say that it is one of the transmission circuits and channels that link key elements of modern dilemmas. Nostalgia and resentment disturb the optics, make it impossible to be in the present, settle in our surroundings and deal with what concerns us as artists, humanists and co-creators of culture. I understand that you quoted Gastev, as he predicted a wide-ranging mechanisation of the body and techno-biopolitical methods of governing it which, sadly, in many aspects has become our reality. Gastev, however, is not the forerunner of multimedia art but of a thoughtless and dangerous process in which a human being is to be made subservient to different technocrats, as they were dubbed by Lewis Mumford, and to technological processes themselves. Many artists during the Modernist period were fascinated with technology, like Vsevolod Meyerhold whom I mention in my book. Yet the acceleration of civilisational growth showed a face so far unimaginable by putting technology and science to use during the Second World War, decades of Cold War and times of terrorism. Many contemporary artists consciously and critically regard the latest technological developments. For instance, the works of Eduardo Kac, the SymbioticA group or Stelarc cannot be possibly seen as an attempt to extend and expand technocracy, to dazzle the audience with new genetic technologies, but rather as a critique of the definitions and possibilities of a contemporary understanding of the phenomenon of life in general, not only human life. By rejecting resentment, as unnecessary baggage, this art strives to be a part of the present.

A short literary text, even a tiny haiku, if brilliant, may evoke the forces of imagination and sensibility without involving anything apart from a sheet of paper and a thinking mind. Nowadays, we have a lot of excellent and lavish multimedia projects that engage several senses at once and incorporate interactions with our environment (including ourselves).

How these two types of phenomena should be seen? If a good poem has such an impact, then maybe a multimedia creation has the contrary effect and by giving us so much, it only brings confusion? Or the situation is different: the play of sensibility inspired by poetry is only a scrap from the true feast offered by the modern multimedia artistic hybrid?

This is dependent on individual sensibility, place and time of reception. I guess that one can be stirred by both a haiku and a multimedia performance. This situation is not new; it has been like that for ages. Theatre is a good example: in ancient Greece its purpose was to move, create the feeling of *catharsis* and we know that even back then this experience was consciously projected as a primarily physiological sensation of the organism. Many multimedia installations aim for a similar effect. Today, *catharsis* is defined differently with the use of tools and research results supplied by cognitive psychology or cognitive science. Those who research new media often emphasise that the image itself, on the technological level, is designed as a renewable matrix of pixels and changes our perception. What is equally important in contemporary art is that art does not merely want to move, there are certain areas of art that serve as extensions of scientific laboratories. What does this mean? An artist, quite often also an engineer (fusing the competences of an artist and scientist is nothing new, it has been present since the Renaissance), uses the language of art, its infrastructure to achieve a social implementation of particular issues through the artwork defined as an object, a concept, a process on the aesthetic, psychosomatic, political, philosophical and cognitive levels.

What type of aesthetic engagement would you describe as typical for moist media art?

Moist media art is closely linked to the achievements of new science and technology. Aesthetics is less important here than definitions of life and reality. In Roy Ascott's understanding of moist media, the network becomes more coherent on the biological level: media and technological tools are not considered in opposition to humans, but become a part of a moist, that is living, reality. Modernity discovers the level of nanostructures and nanoprocesses and art builds upon these new developments. Scientists currently point to different definitions of life, not only carbon-based, but also potential life. The art of moist media searches for new possibilities of testing, or even projecting, new channels of distributing these definitions.

Accepting the reality of moist media means that humans ceased to be the superior figure ordering the world according to the human/non-human dichotomy. Does this extension of our sensorium correspond with the transhumanist approach, understood as extending the essentialist self, or

is it connected to the transhumanist perspective, seen as an evolutionary development necessary to overcome human frailties and limitations by technological links with the environment?

That is a very important question, thank you for asking about this matter. *Sensorium* helped me understand that, owing to the research I reference in humanities, arts, science, cognitive psychology, the dichotomy human versus environmental has no sufficient justification nowadays. You really may have the impression that in this book I am examining the process of extending the essentialist self, the boundaries between the self and its surroundings. The perspective I adopted is truly human, if not subjective. This optics presumes and emphasises somatics, embodiment and movement as the key elements of understanding reality, which may also incorporate mapping an individual's existence. In my new book, *Ekotopies. The Expansion of Technoculture*, however, I give even more attention to delineating the historical, cultural and artistic phenomena that unambiguously reposition the human being as a part of the environment. The perspective of the essentialist self is loosened to underscore the strong relationships between living organisms and their immediate environment. Extremely complex modern technological tools, tests and laboratory experiments help us understand not only many processes that unfold between humans and their environment, but also the fact that on the physical and biological level we are built of the same atoms and structures as the Earth that we live on. This is not a transhumanist or a transhuman perspective, rather an antropotechnical one. Although it may be seen as such, as in the humanistic tradition *humanitas* signifies a cognizant being capable of using language, thus different than the surrounding world, since it has the possibility of meta-cognition. Loosening the category of *humanitas* makes it possible to re-examine *antropos*, reassess this cultural construct and face up to the definitions of the human in modernity. This is a fundamental and pressing need not so much in science and technology, which have already redefined what it means to be human in our times, but in culture and art that should find the strength not only to generate critical examination, but also to contribute to these new definitions from a broader perspective. It can be said that this situation deprives us of metaphysical illusions, which may be difficult, yet it also allows us to literally get back down to the Earth and project realistic definitions of being. Actually, in *Ekotopies*, I am interested in a subject simple in itself, but with profound consequences for culture and its discourses, as the fact that no organism should be examined in separation from its environment. In this sense, the well-known mistake of attribution may be extended to include the definition of a human being that should not be seen in separation of particular surroundings, whether biological, physical or symbolic such as, for instance, social and cultural. Realising this fact results in new definitions of anthropo and naturotechniques, as Peter Sloterdijk calls them, showcasing strong technoscientific determinants which should be investigated by culture,

humanities and social sciences. The discourse on this subject should be created between traditional disciplines installed in a network of phenomena, data, facts and not within carefully delineated boundaries of research areas.

Agnieszka Jelewska – Dr., founder and director of the Interdisciplinary Research Center Humanities/Art/Technology (HAT Center, UAM). She is researcher, lecturer and sometimes practitioner. Since 2001 she has been the lecturer at the theatre studies of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. In addition since 2006 she has been lecturing at the Faculty of Set Design of University of Fine Arts in Poznan and at the Faculty of Dance Theatre of the State Theatre School in Cracow. In 2003 and 2004 she was the Visiting Research Scholar and lecturer at the University of Kent in Canterbury (UK). She was granted the scholarship of the Foundation for Polish Science (2005) and the Society for Theatre Research in London (2003). She was the expert of the European Leonardo da Vinci pilot program in the years 2006 – 2007. She has participated in and organized numerous international conferences, she is a editor of book series about contemporary dance and culture. She carries out interdisciplinary research on theatre, dance, visual culture, architecture and new media. The author of *Edward Gordon Craig's Myth of the Art of the Theatre* (2007) and *Sensorium. Essays on Art and Technology* (2012), as well as *Ecotopias. The Expansion of Technoculture* (2013).⁴⁶

<http://www.hatcenter.amu.edu.pl/en>

⁴⁶ Source: <http://www.hatcenter.amu.edu.pl/en/hat/team/>