

Interview à propos de "sk-interfaces"

Ivana Mulatero (reviewed by Franco Torriani)

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The Life Sciences, increasingly convergent technologies, and art practices today continuously get blended, as many artists realize their productions with materials and techniques related to the manipulation of living matter. After having curated the seminal *Art Biotech* exhibition in France, in 2003, which has almost become the very manifesto of *Biotech Art*, five years later, the curator and media theorician Jens Hauser has proposed *sk-interfaces*, another impressive and cutting-edge exhibition "exploding borders in art, technology and society". First staged in Liverpool (the publication *sk-interfaces*, edited by Jens Hauser, was published by the Liverpool University Press, in 2008), this exhibition has been further enlarged to be shown at Casino – Forum d'Art Contemporain in the City of Luxembourg (2009-2010). Participating artists were Art Orienté objet, Maurice Benayoun, Zane Berzina, Critical Art Ensemble, Wim Delvoye, Olivier Goulet, Eduardo Kac, Antal Lakner, Yann Marussich, Kira O'Reilly, Zbigniew Oksjuta, ORLAN, Philippe Rahm, Julia Reodica, Stelarc, Jun Takita, The Office of Experiments, The Tissue Culture and Art Project, Sissel Tolaas, Paul Vanouse. Publisher: Casino Luxembourg-Forum d'art contemporaine, 2009).

The large scope of the presented technology based art works is best resumed by one of Hauser's key statements: "Today, in the context of the so-called *Life Sciences*, media and technological interfaces can no longer be considered merely as telecommunicative, digital or human-machine interfaces." *sk-interfaces* intended to examine, via the skin as our natural interface with the world, "the in-between space of our contemporary ontological grey zones." At the occasion of the exhibition in Luxembourg, Ivana Mulatero, an independent art critic focussing on the relationships between art and sciences, conducted the following interview with Jens Hauser, initially published in 2010 in the Italian art magazine *Juliet*.

Franco Torriani

Ivana Mulatero - *Since the exhibition that you organized in 2003, in France, L'Art Biotech, the first exhibition of Biotech Art at Le Lieu Unique, in Nantes – what have been the developments in your research? Which new directions does Biotech Art currently take, both in terms of underlying theory and artistic experimentation?*

Jens Hauser - After the first show I became aware that the research of many artists working within biotechnology was increasingly addressing the skin. The skin is our natural interface with the world. However, technological extensions are increasingly taking over its role. These interfaces create both new types of freedom and new constraints. Representing a multitude of different disciplines, *sk-interfaces* now presents twenty international artists who reflect on how the modern techno-sciences have altered our relationship with the world. Tele-presence, digital technology, biological architectures as well as bio-prostheses, tissue engineering or transgenic cultures – all

these are no longer mere subjects for artists but tools, methods and means of expression. The Canadian theorist Marshall McLuhan once suggested that every media and every technology constitutes an extension of the human body, something not unlike an electronic skin that embraces the world, and in which the insides and the outsides are no longer clearly distinguishable. But when he once devilishly prophesized that scenario, the context was very different from the current one: it was the electronic age. When McLuhan stated that "we now wear all mankind as our skin" he referred to global interconnectivity as a dominant theme. These prosthetic extensions seem to come "naturally" to us, but as the great cost of "self-amputation". Prostheses enhance some feelings and states of consciousness, whereas others are numbed and atrophied. It is legitimate to speculate about the impact that these developments have regarding the complexity of perceptual categories such as touch, smell, taste or even hearing, when almost everything is bound to the omnipresent media stimulation of the optic nerve. Further, will the confusion of our senses make us insensitive? Will the distinction between short and long-range perception still matter? Our *being-in-the-world* can it be built upon data flows?

IM - *What is the particular focus that emerges out of the concept of the "interface"?*

JH- Today in the context of the so-called Life Sciences, media and interfaces can no longer be regarded only as man-machine interfaces, tele-communicative and digital ones. Usually, the interface implies the transmission of data between elements that relate to each other through shared protocols and, often, computers. To me, the interface needs to be understood as a much broader concept that involves connectivity at large and, of course, this also includes biological systems where parameters are "programmed" not only electronically but also chemically and biologically. *Biomedica* seem to blur the boundaries between the living and the non-living, between the animal and the plant kingdom. In the era of "bio-facticity", to use a concept by German philosopher Nicole C. Karafyllis, even things that seem to grow naturally are now technologically induced. Today with the convergence of different media, artists may use different tools, bits, cells and genes in every kind of combination. With their works, they expose the gap between apologetic discourses on techno-science on one hand, and paranoia or the justified rejection of the increased technological power on the other.

IM - *During a conference in Milan in 2008 you elaborated on a concept of oscillation between a "meaning culture" and a "presence culture". It seems that this has influenced your curatorial work.*

JH – It is true that *sk-interfaces* brings into play the concept of "production of presence" proposed by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht: many artworks dramatically produce a state of tension beyond the "effects of meaning", they need to be apprehended not rationally but viscerally, beyond interpretation. These works produce fascination or repulsion and act on the sensorial and physical level. The public can actually wear Antal Lakner's *Passive Dress - Double Gravity Suit* (2004). At first sight, it resembles a space suit, but it produces effects that are felt as double the force of gravity, every gesture becomes very difficult. While wearing it, all attention is focused on maintaining the upright posture and to make simple movements. This shell-like interface transforms our motor sense movements. Our relation with the "outside world" has to comprise a dimension of physical experience. In many works all senses are involved, not just observation and, derived from it, interpretation. This physical connection can be put in relationship to the perspective of what Gumbrecht describes as typically pre-modern. It is the involvement of the body that tells us much about our place in the world. Today we need to realize that we are neither out of nature nor out of technology. Dealing with the relationship between art and technology emphasizes that as human beings we deal with nature through technology, but we must consider ourselves as part of both.

IM - *Where do pre-modern and post-modern visions meet at an ontological level?*

JH - *sk-interfaces'* focus is on our becoming rather than on what we believe that we are. From this point of view, *sk-interfaces* especially examines the role of the constituting hyphen *in*, and *as* its title. The hyphen symbolizes the ontological in-between space, the grey area of contemporary culture. In *sk-interfaces* there is of course the *skin* and the *interface*, but it is neither an exhibition about skin nor about interfaces. The art works in *sk-interfaces* connect the potential of tools and methods from multiple specialist disciplines, including their ideological origin and ethical implications. Within sight of utopias and dystopias that this context inspires, it is no surprise that artists are increasingly interested to use skin, both functionally and metaphorically. The skin is visually a surface and a hybrid containing the self, but psychologically it is a semi-permeable active membrane. Skin is a metaphor for the unstable boundaries of our bodies and our lives. *sk-interfaces* therefore becomes a *trompe l'oeil* concept which tries to make these membranes real. Moreover, it underlines the growing importance of the threshold state of inbetweenness, much like a rite of passage, a thrilling and uncomfortable betwixt-and-between position, a time of transition during which one is neither here nor there, but in a situation of enhanced self-reflection.

IM - *Compared to the previous sk-interfaces exhibition at FACT in Liverpool in 2008, the show in Luxembourg presents some new art works. For example Eduardo Kac's Transgenic Art project Natural History of the Enigma (2009) reflects on the contiguity of life in different species. By combining human and plant DNA through genetic engineering, a flower has been produced which expresses a protein in its own veins that is based on a DNA sequence extracted from the blood of the artist. Kac has called this flower a "plantimal", a hybrid of himself and a Petunia, named "Edunia". What other research currents are you aiming at to portray in sk-interfaces in Luxembourg?*

JH - The current fashion of the so called *Biotech Art* is being put in parallel with Body and Electronic Art, so that the pervasiveness of media may appear not only as a rude shift, but also as a continuity at all levels. For example, Maurice Benayoun's interactive virtual reality installation engages the body of the viewer in a both similar and dissimilar way compared to Orlan's *Manteau d'Arlequin* (2007). The latter is a growing patchwork of living cells from the artist's body, co-cultured with a cell line originating from a female "black" foetus and purchased online. They are put in culture in a bioreactor that forms the head of the Harlequin's dress, a symbol for the hybrid. Biotech Art here is linked to a long history, linking it to aesthetic theories of the nineteenth century that already challenged the idea of art as mimesis and representation. The word "art" automatically brings about the concept of representation. In Biotech Art, the particular type of *presence* is indeed also a kind of representation. Since the show in 2003, my aim is to exhibit artists who actually work with living entities and not simply by representing or symbolizing them. But when looking more closely, it is sure that this presence can be seen as representation in other ways: presented *in vitro* experiments are, so to say, also a representation of the *in vivo* level. Another connection to art history is the idea that when something has a living presence it is also destined to die and, if something has to die, it means that it is alive, not necessarily forever, but at least within the observable time frame. We can establish connections here to the ancient Still Life tradition, in which Vanitas depictions accentuated the living and pointed out that the focus of life is death. In Still Life we also historically encounter technical devices and measuring instruments, these are often central in the staging of the living Biotech Art. Now, *sk-interfaces* underlines that technology has become "natural", thus generating an uncertain ontological status of ourselves. Artists put their fingers into these wounds by actually taking the risk of "doing" instead of reaffirming the boundaries at a comfortable distance, which some feel tempted to label "critical distance". I am particularly interested in this courageous attitude that largely goes beyond provocation, as the future

may not be represented from a distance only.

IM - *Four works on display, those by the Critical Art Ensemble, Orlan, O'Reilly and Vanouse, are the result of a residency at SymbioticA, the interdisciplinary art laboratory at the University of Perth, in Western Australia. Does the use of laboratory techniques raise ethical questions whether is it right, or even necessary, to impose limits to artists that work with biotechnologies?*

JH – Artists that I know are very careful in regards to the respect of laboratory procedures. The aim is not to create monsters or potentially dangerous work. There is a very high level of responsibility. Most artists will even highlight these ethical issues. According to me, it does not seem to be a suitable or even critical position to state "we do not engage with the tools of biotechnology and leave these to others and then try to fight against those artists who use them". Artists may even provoke effects within the scientific communities. The real "danger" – if this is the term to choose – would be a more image based approach. By becoming accessible to artists, technologies such as transgenics may appear as banalized and normalized, because even artists use them. But there is no solution to this dilemma. There is no point either to blame an artist who decides to use these Life Sciences technologies. We may remember that it even happened when artists worked with computers in the '60s, and were then accused of collaborating with the military industrial complex. Using machines only available to a small part of the community, they were considered suspicious. Artists can fruitfully blend practical, educational, ethical and philosophical concepts and make them visible and concrete for our society.