Interview to Gwenn-Aël Lynn
Laura Capuozzo

Gwenn Aël-Lynn is a french-american artist whose research not only uses non-traditional languages and tools, but also focuses on transcultural themes.
He is a sculpture, but also a "botanist", as he calls himself.
His interest in plants led him to create evocative and multi-sensory installations.
The choice of using this "hard yet perishable" material binds not only to the artist's personal experience, but also to a socio-political reflection on post-colonial identity. Gwenn points out that every culture has its own ecosystem of odors, but that most of us do not have the olfactory abilities to recognize them all. Even so, in one of his installations, he associated smell to sound, giving rise to a site-specific and trans-disciplinary artwork.
In another, however, he invited visitors to speak about their origins, in a winter garden. Then, the performance becomes an interesting experiment on the "literal" and "metaphorical" meaning of roots.
Moving between smells, sounds and food, Gwenn tries to investigate the complex phenomena of our perception and the concept of identity in relation to our roots and our culture.

Laura: Your work often includes biological material, mainly plants. When did you start using living organisms in your artistic practice and why?

Gwenn: In the mid nineties, right while I was finishing my undergraduate college at the University of Southern California, I started using dead leaves from trees, because I wanted to use perishable material. I guess early on I had this thing against hard material that had the pretension of defying time. I also wanted to use material that would symbolize time. In French culture, dead leaves are particularly tied to the season of autumn, which is always a nostalgic time because it announces winter. A few years later I used dead leaves again in an installation (that never left my studio) to indicate cyclical time. Being the by product of plants life cycle and symbolizing a particular season, they seemed to naturally embody a cycle of time. I contrasted them with bones to symbolize linear time. Vertebrates are born and die, they don't sprout back to life like plants do. So that's how it all started. Fast forward to the 2000's The first project in which I used plants again, and this time plants that are still alive, is the « *Great Lakes Herbal Tea Project».* This is of course more of a « tea project » than a « plant project », or at least that's how I conceived of it. I have been interested in the cultures surrounding tea for many years, and though this is not my first « tea project », this was the first one that required a long investigation in the flora of a particular region. So I researched endemic plants to the Great Lakes area that could be brewed into herbal teas. Though I had the idea for using the steam from steeping herbal teas while living in France, moving to Chicago actually compelled me to do this particular project. I'm still asking myself how much my relocation to the American Mid-West, and residing in the capital of farmland, has driven my relationship to plants. Is it not a strange coincidence that my output of work with plants has significantly increased after moving here? Or maybe I'm just getting older? In High School, in France, the teachers would take the students to the forest to collect leaves to make herbarium in book format. I hated it! Whereas now I can really relate to the fascination a botanist has for the structure of plants and their many variations. There are so many combinations of the shape of one leaf, how its stem is connected to the branch, etc. the possibilities are infinite. It is nature at its best.

So this is definitely something I revel in now. As a matter of fact, the notion of diversity arose out of the biological sciences. Think of bio-diversity. There are very meaningful parallels between the valorization of bio-diversity in life sciences and environmental advocacy and the promotion of differences between groups of human beings.

Now in terms of « why », well there is this relationship to time that I expressed earlier. When using odorant plants it is also a simple way of making olfactory work, without having recourse to chemistry. And finally, there is the fact that I have done many food performances, and one of the things we eat in great quantities are plants (vegetables and cereals). When I did these pieces I was more focused on the symbol and cultural meaning of the ingredients (corn, peanuts, etc) but these performances have brought me in close contact with plants. So I guess they naturally became part of my material. And finally, plants allow me to have elements that are alive. Provided I have taken in account the temperature of the exhibition space and that I can (or an assistant) water them regularly, plants are perfect for an installation format.

Laura: I desire to ask you about you relationship with technology: how is your relation with information technologies in art practice?

Gwenn: I do not consistently use electronics, there are moments where I can be very low tech (just movements, or food for instance), but when I do work with new technology it is mostly with open source software, and that's because I think one of the plagues of our current economy (especially in the US) is the idea of private property. It is usually admitted that the birth of capitalism happened in England when open land (land with common use rights) became enclosed for the sole profit of its new owner. Where the common people could have their cattle graze, or could collect the left over of past harvest, now sat a single owner with exclusive rights to his parcel of land. While this process was undergoing, there were many "enclosure riots" and rebellions in England in the 16th and 17th centuries. When taken to an extreme this idea of private property leads to aberration like Millenium Park in Chicago, supposedly a public park, but so many parts of this park have been financed by private corporations, who have left their logos everywhere, that they have led the park to be so regulated, that one cannot sit where she wants without being disturbed by a guard who tells her to move to a designated area for sitting. In the world of information technology, you have examples like Apple that are so bent on controlling all their products that the workers who make them are killing themselves because of untenable working conditions. Another instance is research in multi touch sensing. It can be traced back into the early sixties, before Apple even existed, they themselves did not contribute to the field. All Steve Jobs ever did was buying back the patents of other inventors, and then apply a thin coat of Apple trademark on it, which allowed him to jack up his prices. Yet Apple had the arrogance to attempt patenting it. They were denied the patent for "Multi-Touch" precisely because it was a collective effort among several laboratories and researchers that took years to develop. And Apple was never part of it. So open source programs provide alternatives to this kind of irrational and greedy behavior, and aside from the fact that they are distributed freely, they have huge community support, and thus build mutual reliance, which, I think, empower the users, instead of making them dependent on customer service that stops helping you once you have maxed out your credit card. And using open source software forces you to learn code (however simple, or difficult, that may be given one's skills and knowledge), which teaches you about computers and once again makes you able to maintain your machine yourself, instead of having to buy some maintenance contract. When I was in graduate school at the Sorbonne, in France, my D.E.A. thesis was about, what I called, "An Economy Of The Gift." It mostly discussed the food performances I was doing at that time, and how giving the art away (in this case

performative food) circumvented the ruthlessness, the wild capitalism, of the art market. Of course, in the early nineties the first artist to really subvert the relationship artists had with the market, at that time, was Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Who, I think, was one of the greatest influences of the end of the 20th century. And he did so by giving away art that could nevertheless be collected. In essence the collector was buying his obligation to give away art. That's brilliant! It's not so much that I believe that if we are born in a market economy, we can choose to live outside of it, it's more that artist have a social and political responsibility because they show their work publicly. Therefore they have to decide where they situate themselves in relation to public issues, like the market, like private property, etc. So for me, aside from the practicalities of working with open source software that I mentioned earlier, choosing to work with Max-Msp (privately owned) or with Pure Data (open source) does not send the same political message, and does not make the same comment at all about how I participate in global economics. And to be fair, truly experimental and innovative media art is developed through these open source platforms, precisely because they are designed around sharing and the circulation of ideas. When was the last time Adobe came up with something radically new?

Laura: Another question concerns the term "interactivity". What does it mean for you?

Gwenn: Interactivity is one of the key components of my work. Myron Kruger, a pioneer of interactive art, said that interactivity is actually a medium. In other words like painting or sculpture it has its own structure and sets of codes. Just like with any other skills, one learns interactivity through practice. The main difference though, is that, unlike with historically established medium like painting or sculpture, viewers do not know how to "look" at interactive art. Particularly since it is not enough to look. The viewer needs to figure out how to "interact" with the work. Therefore the challenge of the artist is to somehow reveal the interactivity inherent in his/her piece to the viewer. A "successful" interactive artwork clearly suggests to the viewer the nature of this interaction. Personally, I favor subtle, non-didactic ways of revealing the interactivity. I would argue that I made interactive work almost as soon as I began making art. Back when I was mainly a sculptor (in the more traditional sense of the term) I would always place the focus of the piece (a particular object, a book, a word, etc) away from the main sightline, so that viewers add to contort themselves, bend down or do something, where their body language would indicate that they had seen this thing and thus would signal (if I was observing them during an opening for instance) that they had understood the piece by seeing what was there to be seen. Now that my work is more diffused, less centralized, and transdisciplinary I say that the interactivity is layered. It happens at several level: the research phase often involve participants, either through interviews or workshops, so that's one form of interaction, fairly involved, and then you have collaborators, since I often work collaboratively, so that's another level of interaction, and finally there are the visitors, who activate the piece and therefore complete it. This activation can be through technology (sensors, computer vision, etc) but sometimes it is as simple as ingesting a drink. The difference between the installation and the performances is that for the former, I have to plan ahead and be sure of how the interactivity will happen. Often, all is required from the viewer is to move, which naturally happens when one visits an exhibition. In performance mode I can always improvise at the last minute. if I see that what I was hoping for is not happening, I can switch very quickly. In installation mode I have to make sure that it's going to work before hand. The nice thing with sensing technology is that it discreetly picks up information (movement, pressure, presence, etc), almost surreptitiously, from the viewer. So that the problem of how-to-signal to the visitor the nature of the interaction becomes almost irrelevant (but not completely.) I am aware that this furtiveness could be

problematic under some regime (like an autocratic, or fascist regime), but as long as I am aware of my intentions and of the context where this interaction is happening I think it is all right. In some ways, It is always about this limit.

Personally, I started making interactive art, because as a viewer, the artistic experiences that fulfilled me most were, precisely, those that were interactive. I remember vividly a performance by, the French choreographer, Hervé Robbe where viewers' participation was expected and encouraged. It was titled "Factory" and was a collaboration with Richard Deacon. It was part of an exhibition at the Pompidou Center in Paris: "Hors Limites: l'art et la vie 1952-1994", whose curatorial focus was Fluxus and Happenings (and its numerous offshoots). As a matter of fact, now that we are on the subject of dance, when I started making art and was wondering how to make a living at it, I briefly contemplated becoming a stage designer. I was inspired by Isamu Noguchi, the Japanese American sculptor, who made a living, for a while, by designing stage sets and sculptural props for Martha Graham. He liked it because it enabled him to make functional sculptures that could be manipulated by the dancers. So with this idea of making usable sculptures (I really liked that), I became opened to meeting choreographers. That eventually happened, but I became very quickly tired with the artificiality of the stage. Why trying so hard to reproduce sunlight with projectors when one could work outside in broad daylight? So from this consideration, performance art (as differentiated from "performing arts") was only one step away. So as you can see, in my personal evolution, interactivity and performance are quite intricate. Eventually technology came to the rescue, in the sense that I could also make automated interactive installations, where the interactivity could happen between the "thing" (what is exhibited) and the visitor without the mediation of the performer. So now I just look at it as a set of options: sometimes it is more appropriate to do a performance, and some other times, an idea, or a problem will be better conveyed through an installation. And at other times a performance can happen within an installation, adding one more layer of interactivity to those already present.

Laura: How does your interest in smells is linked to other senses, as sound, by interactive practice? I'm thinking at "Interactive odors and sound installation"....

Gwenn: scents and sounds share the same medium, they propagate through air. While soundwaves displace air molecules, odorant particles float among air molecules. In addition, the auditory and olfactory cranial nerves perpendicularly cross paths in our skull. Based on these physical elements I find there is an organic association between sounds and smells. For more utilitarian artistic considerations, there is also the problem that culturally (in Occident) we are not equipped to appreciate smells. Unlike Visual Art History, there is not a corpus of writings about the History of smells. There are writings, new and old, about olfaction, but not to the same extent that visual culture or sound has been investigated. So I cannot assume that my visitors will know what to make of the scents they perceive. Some might be able to take it beyond the "it smells good" or "it stinks" but in the majority of cases that won't be the case. Furthermore. We are not trained to identify smells. Professionals can recognize up to 100 000 distinct smells, but for the rest of the world, and that's a majority of people, this number is much lower (and of course it varies from individuals to individuals.) There are also cultural differences. To my knowledge it has never been quantified, but I'm convinced that if someone were to study the olfactory abilities of, say, an Indian, compared to a Frenchman, there would be serious differences. And that would be related to how rich or poor their olfactory environment is, and the place of smells within their respective culture. Of course, in cultures, like the US, where it is all about suppressing any kind of smells, the olfactory abilities are going to be drastically reduced. Werner Herterich, a fellow performance artist whom I interviewed once here in Chicago, observed that there may be a correlation between a modernist minimalist place

and the neutralization of smell[1]. This observation led me to think that this is akin to wiping out a memory. The impoverishment of our olfactory environment would equate the erasure of memory, and therefore of history. If we were to take this to a political level (that would be quite a jump) it would be something like: it is in the interest of imperial capitalism to neutralize scents, so history is forgotten, and thus the chances of contesting this economy are minimized because the people subjected to capitalist hegemony have no way of remembering what the captains of this economy did[2].

So to get back to the fact that most viewers are not that well versed in olfaction, I figured that they need some non olfactory clue to complement the smell they are exposed to in order to "make sense" of why a particular scent is included in the installation they are visiting. That's where sound comes in. We live in such a visually saturated society, that I call it the "visual hegemony" (and here I'm using "hegemony" in a Gramscian" sense). I'm of course mostly referring to the hegemony of the audiovisual media (TV, radio etc.) So I chose from the beginning not to add any other visual layers (video etc) than what's already there (the diffusers, the speakers etc). Instead sound comes into play by introducing on the one hand something recognizable (a sound) and on the other hand by bringing in some conceptual/critical dimension to this "audiolfactory" combination. Otherwise, if I were just diffusing a smell (or a series of smells), for all the reasons listed above, it would simply remain a sensory experience. I have a problem with strictly sensory work, unless they play with our perception (like the work of the "Light and Space" movement from California), because it becomes an exact replica of what already exists in nature. If you take a walk in the forest during Spring time, or if you stroll through the bazars of Morocco, Turkey, or the markets of India, you'll get plenty of olfactory sensory experience. You don't need me to experience scents. All you have to do is be receptive to your olfactory environment. On the other hand, with the insertion of sound in my installations, emerges a critical dimension from the "audiolfactory" combination. If I did not have any sound to "Interactive Odour and Sound Installation" (2006) it would simply be a succession of scents in space. With the sound compositions that Antony Maubert made and the interview abstracts associated to each scents, this piece becomes about the post-colonial Netherlands[3], and about the contestation of a euro centric definition of Dutch culture. Which unfortunately, given the recent political evolution of that country, seems to prevail. But that's where I'm glad I made that project when I did, because at least, at that time, it contributed to opening up a debate regarding that hegemony.

In terms of the interactivity of this installation, it is through sounds that the scents were harvested (conversations with the interviewees.) and then recreated by Michel Roudnitska. Sound and smell collaborate to convey the purpose of this installation: questioning the audio-visually dominated discourse of Dutch identity. Who decides who is Dutch and how is this decided? The Politico-Mediatico conglomerate hammers that "Dutchness" is white, born in Holland, and speaks Dutch, yet it forgets that as recently as 1975 if you were born in Surinam, were brown, and spoke Taki-Taki, you were Dutch too. So what happens if I approach this question from an olfactory perception and ask the Dutch people left out by the Politico-Mediatico conglomerate? We get this installation where sound and smell interact to reveal another idea of Dutchness, another possibility. And then Dutch visitors (of all walks of life) trigger it when they visit the exhibition and walk away reconsidering this question. They have to actively engage with the installation, they are not sitting passively on their couch absorbing the propaganda of the broadcast media. Being physically active, moving around to trigger scents and sounds, puts their brain and heart in motion too. Their senses open up their perception and their thinking process.

Laura: As you know, I'm interested in interactive practice. How do you create a performance like "Tea is the Needle" or like "Great Lakes Herbal Tea Project"? Did you collaborate with other artistic figure?

Gwenn: As I've expressed above, interactivity and collaboration are intertwined in my practice. Though some of my projects are solo projects, there are also many that are collaborative. If you are a transdisciplinary artist, you have to collaborate, because the more disciplines you integrate, the more you over extend yourself over these disciplines, so there is this moment when you are simply not able to do it all alone, or you simply do not have the knowledge and skills to do it all. Personally I like sound, I studied classical guitar when I was a teenager, I've always like music. Now I'm more interested in New Music and Sound Art, but I still would definitely not have the pretension of labeling myself a "sound" artist, though I know quite a lot about acoustics and sound. From the beginning, when I started working with sound, I thought that it would be more judicious to associate myself with people whose very expertise was sound, rather than me striking alone and trying to do everything, smells, sound, sculpture, electronics, etc. I think the result would have been mediocre if I had done it all alone. Collaboration also offers the advantage of associating several minds where ideas circulate. We can critique each other. This continuous feedback enhances the final project. Unity is more productive than division. However, I do, at times, work alone. Such is the case with "*Great Lakes Herbal Tea Project.*" That's actually a solo project. The process involved a preliminary quest: finding endemic herbs to the region that could be brewed into teas. This quest lasted over a month. It was actually a nice way to explore my new home: Chicago. From there I envisioned an installation made from endemic herbs, whose steam, as they are boiling into a tea, would odorize the exhibition space. By the same token this steam would also generate sound as it is coming out of the kettles. When water boils it turns into steam, but it also produces bubbles, which produce sound. This steam when filtered by a whistle, gives off a pitch, this is the principle of a teakettle. By replacing the whistle by a tube, one can control the wavelength of the vibrating air column inside. Different lengths of tubes lead to different pitches. If there are several tubes of varying length, it is possible to tune them in order to form a chord. This is the principle of a calliope (or array of tuned steam whistles). Then I spent the three summer months of 2007 doing lots of trial and error experimentation, cutting the pipes and fitting them until I got the pitch I was looking for each of them. I settled for a pentatonic chord, because Chicago is considered one of the homes of blues music, whose foundation stem from pentatonic scales. Because water boiling in a kettle creates a dynamic environment, the steam pressing through the organ pipes is unstable; therefore the chord oscillates along several intervals. Its notes do not remain on an exact fixed pitch. These intervals are: F#, G-Ab, Bb-C#, D. The plants that were matched with each of these intervals are respectively: Sassafras, bear berry (uva Ursi), Hawthorn leaves, bone set, and wild American ginger. I sorted the plants according to their scent, along a spectrum ranging from sweet to bitter. Light, fresh and sweet smells were matched with the higher pitch, while the heavier, balsamic and bitter smells were matched with the the lower pitch of the spectrum.

"Tea is the Needle", on the other hand, is a partial collaboration with Natalia Borissova, a sound artist; I met at the Nida Art Colony. I researched plants endemic to the Curonian Spit: *Thymus serpyllum*, *Fragaria vesca*, *Hypericum perforatum, Rosa canina, Achillea Millefolia* that could be brewed into herbal tea (Lithuanians are big into herbal teas.) To prepare for this performance, I practiced in the Big Hall of the colony for two weeks where I set to find movements and mood related to the scent of each tea, and I conducted a performative scent workshop: once with some of the artists in residence, and a second time on the first day of the symposium on interdisciplinary art held at the Colony. The movements were basically "how to serve each tea". I analyzed the smell of each plant and looked, for how it would affect my mood, for how quickly the scent would propagate, its weight, and a number of other properties. From this analysis I came up with movements that were either slow, close to the ground, or elevated, etc. I was thus able to draw a short

improvisation canvas that I could use when serving each respective tea.

During the first workshop I met Natalia, who expressed interest in articulating one of her acoustic experiments with the olfactory methodology developed in the workshop. Because we were really short on time, and she had to be absent for a few days, we did not have a chance to practice the sounds in relation to each scent as much as I would have liked, but Natalia nevertheless suggested to experiment with the amplification of the pouring of the teas, etc. So, I managed to find a relation for the acoustics of each tea (that's the beginning of the performance). In other words by choosing a particular vessel for each tea, and carefully paying attention to the material of these vessels (and what other material they are placed on) I can create a different acoustic "affect" that I then amplify with micro contacts. Then Natalia kicks in with her electromagnets that vibrate a metal grid placed on the tea table. By placing the cups and/or the teapots on this grid we can modulate these vibrations. Then we invite the public to play with this set up while they are sipping their tea. So the performance becomes an interactive live tuning of tea, scent, sound and movement.

Laura: Still on the interaction. In "Racines..." (jardin parlant), there is an interaction between biology (the garden) and artificial physical elements like interactive sound. How do you consider the relation - and the interaction - between technology and biology? And how they coexist in your performance?

Gwenn: It's funny that you look at "*Racines...*" as a performance, I've always thought of it as an installation (or more precisely a winter garden), but given that it's the viewer who activates this sound garden, I guess it can be seen as a performance too...

I'm about to answer your question, but first I'd like to dispel, what I consider a false dichotomy. People often ask me about "artificial" smells and "natural" smells. And here you are doing the same with sound and plant. To me this distinction between artificial and natural is false. Primarily, because, as Clément Rosset, in "*L'Anti-nature*", has pointed out, the concept of "nature" is actually anthropocentrist. Nature exists in and of itself (even though this could be argued about metaphysically, but that's another problem), but nature does not conceive of itself as "Nature". We do, we are the ones who come up with the concept of nature (as opposed to civilization, culture, etc). And because we, humans, have invented the concept of nature, I say that nature, is actually a cultural concept (as a matter of fact, no all cultures, worldwide, have this concept) Therefore nature and culture are two facets of the same thing. Hence, as far as I'm concerned, the distinction between artificial, and natural is irrelevant. Sound is a psycho-acoustic phenomena, and plants, that have been transplanted into a former school building to create a winter garden, are not a "natural" phenomena. I manipulated both sound and plant. I have sourced both sounds and plants and interfaced them in a creation of mine. If you will, I have put together natural elements in a cultural manipulation (if we are to maintain the dichotomy between natural and artificial), but in the end, it is entirely cultural, because the plants and the sounds have been re-contextualized in an indoor garden (and that's definitely not "natural.")

Now to answer your question directly, I would argue that the interaction between plants and sound, in this installation, is mediated via the visitor. It is she who triggers the sound, as she approaches specific plants in the installation. Without the visitor there are no sound. In this particular project, I am investigating the metaphor of roots (as one's origins). So, really it is an investigation in language. Both in English and French, roots symbolize the origin of someone, and I know it is also the case in Spanish. I'm not sure if it is the same in Italian... ? What happens if I interface real roots (plants have literal roots) with the voice of people speaking about their metaphorical roots (their origin). We get this winter garden, made of plants that varied people associated with their origin (sometimes with multiple origins.)

Regarding the relation between technology and plants, there are none per say, because the interactive technology is there to trigger the sounds, and the plants are the cue that attract the visitors. There is a clear relationship between interactive technology and sound, but the plants are not directly affected by this technology. This is not a piece of bio art, per say, in the sense that I am not using any bio-engineering, or anything of that sort, to modify, or manipulate the plants. They are just there. They may be affected by the sounds, but I'm not sure of that. The only "science" involved is that of botany. I consulted with a botanist and gardeners to figure out which plants could cohabitate with each other, what temperature should be maintained in each rooms, how much humidity, etc. This garden is really articulated around the metaphor of roots, and so sounds and plants are interfaced to address this metaphor. Technology in this case is just what it is: a tool.

Laura: In many performances you have invited people to co-participate; you often "use " visitors to co-create installation and, over all, to reach - I think - your final art step. For example, in untitled you used the visitors' movements to associate them to smell and sound diffuser. How is your relationship with the public?

Gwenn: You've said it extremely well: with their "co-participation," visitors complete the installations (or the performances). Like I said earlier, for me the most compelling art is interactive. That's what I enjoy the most as a viewer, therefore that's what I try to restitute to my audience. When making art, one hopes to have an audience, therefore it seems logical to take this audience in consideration, and why not? Integrate them into the work process (if they are willing to). I'm making work for my visitors; therefore I invite them to be part of it, at different levels (like I've explained above, there are many levels of interaction). So, yes, in some ways, they become co-creators. "ce sont les regardeurs qui font les tableaux" - Marcel Duchamp. I guess I took his statement quite literally, without even really thinking about it!

Laura: So, many of your works are "immersive". How immersion enhances your work?

Gwenn: I think it goes back to perception. Our senses are not just "audio visual" and we do not live in a two dimensional environment. In the late nineties I was trying to understand how perception works. I was mainly asking myself, how does my body know its own boundaries? When I hold an object (say a vase) in my hand how do I know that this object is not part of myself? How do I know that the world is real? How can I be so sure hat I'm not going to wake up from this dream soon? Those are common questions, but I had to answer them for myself. Philosophical friends of mine suggested I look into Henri Bergson and, of course, Merleau-Ponty and his "*Phenomenology Of Perception*". So I did, and I actually found some answers in the latter book. From that point on I started trying to make installations that would activate these questions. But they ended up being monumental failures and I never took them outside of the studio. However some of these experiments opened the doors for my current research into smell, sound, food, etc. Also remember, that I studied Astronomy at the onset of my University years, and even though I never completed that degree, nor do I make work that consciously draws on that corpus of knowledge, I suspect that it influences my relation to space. The scientific method definitely has an impulse on my work ethics, and on the fact that I can spend weeks, and months thoroughly investigating a particular issue or problem. It does not bother me to spend hours at the library or doing field research.

Laura: Finally, about the artistic use of technology. What do you think about the "new media art" and "biotech art" definitions? How do you define your art practice ?

Gwenn: I think my practice is really transdisciplinary. That's usually how I describe it, along with the term interactive. Being transdisciplinary evolves. It's not always the same two or three disciplines that get interfaced. Botany and gardening have only been part of my practice for the last 4 years. And who knows what will come in the future? I definitely think that "new media art" can be used to describe what I do, because I do use software, electronical components, computer etc. But regarding the actual term, I find it somewhat vague, especially when it comes to the adjective: "new." Unless I'm mistaken, one of the first "cybernetic" sculpture of Nicolas Schöffer dates back to 1956 (CYSP.) So it's rather old... And within this genre there are so many sub-categories, that the expression "new media art" is really broad. One thing I found interesting though is when I was in the Netherlands (working on the "interactive odour and sound installation") there they simply used the term "media" art (no "new" in there) and of course that encompassed video art, as well as computer based art. So that's an even broader definition. And why not?

There is one thing too, that I have to be honest about. I think there is a difference between artists that make art about technology, or about science, and artist like me, who use technology, or applied science, to address political questions, cultural problems, identity, etc... I do not directly address scientific or technological questions; I just responsibly apply these fields to my projects. Even though, one could argue that using technology implies a discourse around it...

And biotech art, well I really don't think I deserve this term, because all I do is I just display plants. I can claim to be a gardener, but I don't think I can claim the "bio engineer" hat. Though, when I was in graduate school, one of my advisers was Eduardo Kac. But when I was advising with him, I was not making anything related to bio art. What really impressed me about him is that 1) he is super smart (it's obvious from his work, but it does not hurt reiterating it) 2) he is extremely versatile 3) he is knowledgeable in many many fields: the political, ethical, post colonialism, any kind of sciences, etc. What really struck me with him, is that I felt I could bring up any question on any subject matter, and he could provide a very relevant discussion. So I don't have any problem per say with the definition of bio art, but that could be because I'm not directly involved with it. This is one area where I'm just a viewer. So far, I have found the term to be quite precise. I think it's an important component of cultural production and discourse, because as bio-engineering, and transgenic technology are progressing, there needs to be an assessment of these tools, and an evaluation of their impact on society. Bio art provides an arena where these things can be played against each other (the ethics of transgenism etc...)

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1   or the substitution of a rich powerful smell by the poor imitation of an artificial "flowery" air spray for instance

2   Or if we take a good look at History, colonizers often complained about the smell of the colonies or even of the « colonized », as if by repressing the smells of indigeneous people the colonizers could deny them even more humanity. An interesting analysis of the Bourgeois repression of the working class is offered by Alain Corbin in his book « *The Foul And The Fragrant »* where he carefully examines the « hygienic revolution » that happened in Paris in parallel with the actual revolution of 1789.

3   Notwithstanding the fact that these scents were selected because of their connection to Dutch colonial History as suggested by the interviewees and the historical record I studied.