

Life Extreme. A conversation with Eduardo Kac

Franco Torriani

extramuseum4@extramuseum.it

A book which is an encounter between an artist, Eduardo Kac, and a philosopher, Avita Ronell. In *Life Extreme*, Kac and Ronell focus on human created beings, a kind of an alternative evolution going back to the 17th century but mainly concentrated on rarely seen creatures of the last decennia. Kac, one of the prominent artist working at the crossroads between Life Sciences, telerobotics, biotechnologies, political and philosophical dimensions of communication processes, encounters in this book Avita Ronell, the Prague born philosopher who is becoming one of the cutting edge voices of the American philosophical scene. The two authors never met before preparing this book (a very sensible idea of the Paris based editor, Danièle Rivière, the publisher is Dis Voir). Engaged with topics rather unusual in traditional philosophy, Avita Ronell presents in the book texts provoking almost disturbing questions on domestication, hybridity, transgenic ("Why should it be unbearable to tolerate a sentence like 'we are already transgenetic'"), Nature ("What is Nature?").

In fact, *Life Extreme* is a book of beautiful and sometimes shocking images, sentences, quotations of philosophers, artists, writers... It is a walk through continents, cultures, ages, from Aristotele to Martin Buber, Nietzsche, Lucian of Samosata, Allen Ginsberg, Foucault, Paik... Different from Kac's previous book, this one is more conversational than analytical, having the goal to help readers to discover a world of human-created life forms. It starts with an 'anthroduction', the work of anthropos is essential..., becoming "a piece of creative writing". The catastrophe, in Ronell's words (on commenting Mary Shelly's "Frankenstein. The Modern Prometheus") is that of Science which had radically forgotten poetry. We are not at the top of the pyramid - says Kac - , we are part of the continuum of life, we need an alternative ecology, an alternative history of evolution. "As transgenic cyborgs, it is only a matter of time before our home would be reinvented". We need to open the doors of the "domus", considering that the list of creatures which are not in this book is endless.

Franco Torriani

September 2008

• Eduardo Kac & Avita Ronell, *Life Extreme. An Illustrated Guide to New Life*, Paris, Dis Voir, 2007.

(there are two versions of the book, one in English and the other in French).

Dialogue

Franco Torriani (F.T.) *Since the night of times humans acted in order to create or at least to modify living beings, but it is true that from the 20th century on, by technology induced practices the human skill on creating different beings increased dramatically. Is Life Extreme first of all a book where you want to analyze life in its most radical and possible directions?*

Eduardo Kac (E.K.) *Life Extreme* is very different from my previous books in that it performs its function more ludicly but no less lucidly. Just as you can have an emotional and intellectual experience with a graphic novel, this book combines word and image to create a fluid experience between both. Its goal is to be less analytical and more conversational. Rather than presenting an argument, it presents readers with the opportunity to discover for themselves a new world of human-created life forms.

F.T. *As an artist working on many issues and forms of arts involving sciences and technologies, from telereobotics to the fields of biology and biotechnology, in this book you seem more focused on a poetic and philosophical approach. We see here human-created beings rarely considered and seen, such as outermost plants and animals showing a kind of an alternative evolution rarely taken into consideration. Having written Life Extreme with an unconventional and prestigious philosopher like Avita Ronell, you explore many dimensions at the crossroads, as you say, between natural history and these peculiar beings. How did you work together in this illustrated guide to a new life?*

E.K. *Life Extreme* is part of a collection called “Rencontres” (Encounters), published by the French publisher Dis Voir. In this collection, the editor, Daniele Riviere, invites a contemporary artist to invite someone else that he or she feels an affinity with but has not yet met. So, the idea is at once that the book becomes the conduit for this encounter and its record. I’ve been following Avital’s work for a long time and felt that this project would be both fun and intellectually stimulating. We met in Paris, at Dis Voir, and recorded our conversation, which later we edited together with the images I had selected.

F.T. *In fact, Life Extreme is also proposed as guide to encounters. Instead of an introduction, you put an anthroduction (the italic is mine), the human, anthropos, is at the origin of the technical performances producing these unique beings. The anthroductions consists of several checklists: alphabetical, chronological, biotechnological and contextual ones.*

Just to give a few examples, in the alphabetical checklist one of the authors, Avital Ronell, appears after Alba the Bunny, your famous fluorescent rabbit, and you after Dolly, the cloned sheep. The chronological checklist starts with the Bizzaria Orange, a chimera realized in Tuscany, an impressive life form realized with cells of two different beings, a bitter orange and a citron, first recorded in 1674 by Pietro Nati, the director of the Botanical Garden in Pisa. Up to this point, this part of the anthroduction sounds poetic and political. When you look at the checklists that follows, the

biological and the contextual, technoscientific topics seems sharper to me. What do you think?

E.K. Usually an introduction consists of a logically organized argument, or a personal impression about the topic being introduced. My introduction to this book has no linear text; instead, it is a collection of lists, of different ways of classifying the material of the book: chronologically, alphabetically, contextually, etc. The goal is to show, in a poetic but equally philosophical manner, that any taxonomy reflects the ideology of the individual who constructs the taxonomy, and that any material can always be classified in multiple ways, leading to different insights. No list is possibly ever complete, no taxonomy ever final. One of the classification methods I propose in the “anthroduction” is “Beings that are not in this book but could very well be.” So, if you look at the “anthroduction” as a whole, as one piece of creative writing, the poetic and philosophical go hand in hand.

F.T. *If you go through the biotechnological list, you have a wide range of techniques, from back-breeding to cloning, tissue culture and the traditional human reproduction. At this stage, Avita Ronell and yourself could only be put in this last file! In the contextual checklist, again, Ronell and you are alone in the pigeon hole of the human family, after a full list of beings ‘produced’ for research purposes, for the entertainment industry, domestic companionship, art, aso. You have been very wise in not exaggerating with human-created beings in art practices. Am I right? It is true that in the ultimate list, the one dedicated to beings who are not in your book but that could very well be, is open to all kinds of contexts and examples, virtually endless...*

E.K. You’re right in all accounts. The book does not accept exaggerations, in the sense that all creatures in the book are alive or have lived like you and I – no metaphors here, only real living creatures. For this reason, all mythical or purely imaginary beings are automatically excluded. Also for this reason there are no drawings, only photographs of the actual creatures. You’re also right in saying that the last list in the “anthroduction” (Beings that are not in this book but could very well be) is endless, since many more creatures were created in the past and more new creatures continue to be routinely created in the present.

F.T. *Actually Life Extreme is an illustrated book, plenty of images in colours facing sentences of philosophers, writers, poets, aso of different times. So you may find in a page the picture of a cubic watermelon grown in Japan in order to spare space, and in the front page a sentence of Leibniz (“It can be said that everything possible demands existence.”....). Oedipus, Martin Buber, Nam June Paik, Ginsberg. Who made the choice? Some beings, like the Blue Roses, have been for long the synonym of the impossible, a poetical dream! They have been created in 2004 by a genetic modification in Australia. In front of them you chose Novalis. Do you suggest that a dream came true by biotechnology?*

What is the invisible link between Perhappiness of Paulo Leminski and the pictures of the clones of Longhorns, this icon of Texas cattle?

E.K. The juxtaposition of words and images in *Life Extreme* is meant to produce a qualitative effect that is more than the quantitative sum of the

parts. One does not illustrate or explain the other; rather, they resonate with one another. The choices were made collaboratively, and Daniele Riviere participated in the process as well. The encounter was, in this sense, between the three of us. By placing Novalis next to the blue rose, I wanted to ask the question of what happens culturally when the unachievable, ideal dream of the past becomes an ordinary, mundane reality? The highest symbol of the romantic ideal can now be purchased around the corner. How is the world constantly remapped in light of ever changing material realities? "Perhappiness" is a single-word poem by Paulo Leminski. This poem is juxtaposed with an idyllic pastoral scene showing free-range bulls, the icon of Texas, a scene that evokes the past, a rural world, a pre-industrial reality with expanding landscapes, the beginning of the New World – possibly a paradisiacal image. Except that, in reality, these bulls are clones of the icon, iclones, if you will. Happiness? Or perhaps something else? A new beginning?

F.T. Avita Ronell's, in the first pages of the book, underlines a poetic influence in science, especially in physics. Nature (Kant) is capable of producing its own "monstrosity". The poet would emerge in this excess. If I understand what Ronell writes, the catastrophe is that of the science which had (I would say has...) radically forgotten poetry. Ronell's analysis, on this respect, of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. The Modern Prometheus is great. How do you feel it, considering that, after Ronell's short text, you see the picture of a Wolphin in transparent blue water, the result of an interspecies union between two mammals, a dolphin and a false killer whale? It is true that this new mammal, half dolphin, half false killer whale, originated in 1985 in the Sea Life Park in Hawaii, like all other animals fall in the facing Martin Buber's sentence: "An animal's eyes have the power to speak a great language".

E.K. Originally, the human role in the creation of the wholphin was nothing more than confining a false killer whale and a dolphin together in the same pool. They mated on their own; humans did not originally force them to mate. If on the one hand this wholphin did have offspring under direct human supervision, on the other it is also true that false killer whales and dolphins do not usually mate in the wild. Was the birth of the first captive wholphin a human-induced accident? Did nature produce a "monster"? We see a close-up picture of a lovely creature's eyes, paired with Buber's "An animal's eyes have the power to speak a great language". Therein the possibility of poetry lies.

F.T. In the short texts published in the book, Avita Ronell introduce delicate topics as regards domestication, a question which has become disturbing more and more. What is your opinion about that, how is technology undermining, I try to resume Ronell's worlds, the metaphysics of an household? For her, a house today is a place stuffed with wires, talking to invisible people. Very true, I guess... She writes, and the approach is rather political and philosophical: what is a family, a couple, a domestication?

How did you discuss it together, you two authors of this book, comparing it also to the trend towards the extreme lives?

E.K. In addition to their radicality, to what they reveal about human imagination and the plasticity of life, the lives presented in the book are also extreme in the sense that they are at the edge of visibility and discourse; they are at the periphery of what most people know or are currently willing to accept. However, this refusal is to a large extent caused precisely by this isolation, by the treatment of these creatures as monsters, aberrations – the non-human other. I have always insisted that life is a spectrum and that we humans are part of a much broader community of life. We need to see ourselves not at the top of a pyramid, but rather as part of the continuum of life, and we need to embrace difference at all levels, we need to respect life in its totality, not just life that falls within the parameters of what is known, what is comfortable, what conforms to past definitions of life. We need to expand the canon. This book makes all the creatures presented here “at home,” in the sense that, seen together, they reveal an alternative ecology, an alternative history of evolution. This is very far from fears that “domestication” (*domus* is “house” in Latin) is a violation of a creature’s wild condition. Created by humans, these beings never had a “wild” to which they belonged before. They are at home with us, transgenic microchimeras that we naturally are, cyborgs full of implants or prosthetic devices that we became. As transgenic cyborgs, it’s only a matter of time before our home would be reinvented. Avital is right in that co-inhabiting with someone is already a form of mutual domestication, of creating a world of shared consensuality within the boundaries of the “*domus*,” a home evermore redefined by wireless digital networking. Our conversation went along these lines, and it’s now housed in the book. The door is open.