

# Unsafe Distance

Franco Torriani

franco.torriani@noemalab.org

We are publishing a conversation between Pavel Sedlak, the curator of “Unsafe Distance” and Franco Torriani, noemalab.org.

In occasion of the third edition of ENTERmultimediale festival, Prague, (November 5<sup>th</sup> 2007- January 7<sup>th</sup> 2008), organized by the CIANT, Prague, and directed by Pavel Smetana, one key exhibition explored some major issues of safety, related to emerging technologies in order to examine phenomena that may have stayed undisclosed. The exhibition at the Stone Bell House, “Unsafe Distance”, curated by Pavel Sedlak (Sedlak was also, with Denisa Kera, one of the two chief curators of ENTER), presented works of the following artists: Paul Adderley & Michel Young, Shawn Bailey & Jennifer Willet, Boo Chapple, Martin Kermes, Spectral Investigations Collective (SIC) & RIXC Media Collective, Peter Cusack, Beatriz Da Costa with Cina Hazegh and Kevin Ponto, Florian Grond & Claudia Robles, Louis-Philippe Demers/Garry Stewart/Australian Dance Theatre, Karen Ingham, Anthony Hall, Louis-Philippe Demers, kuda.org, Pavel Kopriva, Howard Boland & Laura Cinti (c- Lab), Radim Labuda, Lukas Machalichy, Gordana Novakovic, Rachel Mayeri, Andrea Polli, Rob O'Neill, Stelarc, Pavel Thomas/Kevin Raxworthy, Pavel Sterec/ Ales Cermak/Jan Trejbal (Franco Torriani)

Distance is an interval in time and a condition of detachment in space. Distantia (Latin for distance) is an apparent essential and simple topic, in fact it is an intriguing condition of the living beings endlessly and dramatically balancing themselves between need and fear of contacts. Contacts, literally the opposite of distance, are a matter of life and death, their actions on the living beings related to their environment (ecosystem) is what renders the feeling of distance safe or unsafe. Unsafe Distance is a fascinating and almost troubling exhibition with adequate samples of artist practices exploring issues of safety, related to the environment and to the human/non human identity. Artists invited by Pavel Sedlak, the curator of this exhibition, usually integrate emerging technologies and science research with their artist practices, also by working closely with scientists. One of the key question of this event is how advanced technologies and (techno)scientific instruments and results induce uncomfortable changes

in the pattern of distance that human beings - and non-human....- have in mind. This selection of artworks exemplify how the notion of distance is embedded in our society, in other words, they are based on a common sense of fear, of a *distantia* perceived as an unsafe condition. Technologies and sciences have pushed on the borders, but the threshold with its almost archaic rules of safety has become as fuzzy as ever. Are there new marvels and monsters which make us afraid and disoriented? Can at least some artists include these topics in their practices by using images, cells, tissues, sounds?

**Franco Torriani (FT)** *In this exhibition you include a comprehensive choice of artists who use many mediums covering a significant range of cross-productions in arts, sciences, technologies. You also took an attentive glance to artworks which are in fact beyond the direct influence of human bodies and animals, having been focused on space and planet and all what we have in return, for instance, are the effects of electromagnetic fields on the nature and its inhabitants. Is this look on the cosmos a trend that you consider will be more and more taken into account by artists?*

**Pavel Sedlak (PS)** If this was a trend, I would be quite optimistic about the development of our culture. And I actually am. It is a pleasure to see emerge artists who are engaged more and more in issues of safety, environment and the coupling of human and non-human agents. It almost feels like a cultural turn. Humanity has been heavily challenged by processes that include non-human entities and render new views of man. It is our techno-scientific and networked society which makes apparent the post-human condition in which hybrid collectives of humans and non-humans coexist. This condition generates new opportunities for of us to reflect on modalities of our lives in environments that are volatile and rather hostile. Art might deliver exciting perspectives on the future of the living.

**FT** . *The notion of insecurity seems to me a driver of Unsafe Distance, but I have the impression that you consider this human response to technology achievements also a cultural gap, a resistance which is bio/cultural to the constant becoming of new interactions between human beings, environment, society. How can artists be relevant with their work in this changing of landscapes and existences?*

**PS**. On the one hand side, I think we can talk about some kind of new realism. The data overload can be sort of sorted and made more transparent. Artists have the capacity to reveal realities and relationships which are usually hidden and kept so to say safe. On the other hand side, on top of this new realism we are witnessing imaginary proposals that aim to offer inventive solutions to some of the turbulent issues of today such as climate change or, as you suggest, security.

**FT** . *I guess that Unsafe Distance, with their rather open attitude towards art practices and interdisciplinary projects and productions, is due to be and propose itself as a brilliant signal of the biotech era, even if many artists you invited are not strictly concerned with this kind of technologies. Let me use, on this respect, the title of a forthcoming book, Art of the*

*Biotech Era* ( a book related to the homonymous exhibition, Adelaide, 2004). Do you agree with me?

**PS.** I do agree. We have been cyborgs for some time now. However, only recently the biotechnological culture has evolved as an open creative and educational practice. In my opinion, it is an important cultural practice indeed. It makes us aware of the design of the living. Without ideological prejudices it brings forth the questions and responsibilities rendered by interventions in realm of the living. What is most significant to me is the freedom of positioning man, again and with some new implications, along with other species and with the whole non-human world, including all types of data, systems and machines which pilot our existence in the framework of ever more complex processes.

***FT.** Having said that, the artists invited to the exhibition still present a sample of worlds, whatever their dimensions would be, from sounds coming from the Sahel desert to a chemical solution almost proposed as a component of the art-work, or right away as an art medium. On one side, we are facing art practices that still may be considered as “ways of making worlds”, in Nelson Goodman’s sense, on the other side we know that, being life itself, quoting Boris Groys, a possible “...object of technical and artistic intervention (...), one is again confronted with the question of the relationship between art and life”. How important are these issues for you?*

**PS.** They are quite essential. The ways of worldmaking have for sure expanded. Goodman must be surprised what challenges today his concept of artwork as a symbolic system. Life and the living are so heavily embedded in our society that their positioning among other cultural constructs often seems rather inappropriate. I find of particular interest though that contemporary artistic practices deeply reflect on life. Spanish philosopher José Ortega Y Gusset considered early twentieth century avant-garde art to be anti-humanist. Art became mechanical and abstract. It may come as no surprise that we see and identify nowadays significant post-humanist aspects of emerging, life-centred artistic practices. Life has become an object of manipulation, intervention, and even invention.

***FT.** I found a great idea, assuming the distance as a topic of reasoning and showing works, to include robots and the relationship between robots and living beings, mainly humans, but not only them. I wonder if, at this stage, we really know where robots begin and where robots end... I have in mind Jens Hauser’s quoting of Nicole C. Karafyllis with her neologism of “biofact”, melting “the artefact and the bios”. We have a hybrid. Hauser comments on this German philosopher’s concept of biofact and writes, that “...the central characteristic of growth is induced through technical treatment”. I guess hybrid topics are crucial in your research, do you think I’m right and to what extent!?*

**PS.** Sure. We have faced already extreme hybrid biofacts based on autonomous 'evolution' of the teratomatic bodies e.g. in the work of Shawn Bailey and Jennifer Willet. They have produced a variety of laboratory based artworks focusing on irrational incarnations of the biotechnological body. Their work is focused on the Teratoma, a cancerous growth

containing multiple tissues like hair, skin, and vascular systems. To quote the artists, “monstrous as this may seem, scientists today are interested in the Teratoma as an instance of spontaneous cloning, and a source of stem cells”. The artists impose a cultural layer of significance upon these processes and show us that the bodies of ours are just another living experiment. I have been surprised recently, that parts of our bodies can even be chimerical. Imagine a part of yourself, an organ, to be coded by DNA of your unborn brother or sister. Next generation bioconstructs seem to me more relevant compared to artificial robots. A distance between who we are now and who we are emerging to be in very near future has gone slightly liminal.