Beatriz da Costa

> interview

With Jamie Schulte and Brooke Singer you founded the Preemptive Media artist group. One of the most celebrated artworks you made with this group was Swipe. Camouflaged as an alcoholic drinks dispenser, Swipe was a machine accepting an identification document to check your age, but the output consisted of a sheet of paper with all the retrieved data about you obtained from the I.D.. In this artwork the so-called AIDC (Automatic Identification and Data Capture technologies) are brilliantly exploited, generating astonishment based on a simple printed receipt telling a lot about the I.D. owner. Aside from raising consciousness about the pieces of our identity that are scattered in different publicly accessible databases, what you think of the differences between our virtual and biological identity?
Among the things that were important to us in Swipe was to encounter people "in the flesh" so that we could address any questions/concerns/reactions they might have in response to their personal printed "receipt." This led to the bar set-up — with us performing as bartenders, handing over receipts together with the ordered drinks, the operating of Swipe in non-exhibition contexts etc... But to answer your question, I think we all consist of multiple identities that mutually inform and define each other. My medical records, for example, certainly influence who I am in the physical world, (which is one of the reasons people are so concerned to keep access to those records restricted); the same can be said be said for my

passport information, travel records etc.... .

In "Pigeon Blog" you worked with Cina Hazegh and Kevin Ponto, equipping pigeons with combined GPS and GSM open platform phones, interfaced with CO/NOx pollution sensors, to retrieve data on the ground and up to 90 meters altitude - which was then mapped on a Google-based tool. You referred to the project of using pigeons with mechanical cameras as spies during the early 20th century wars that implemented a typical surveillance model: using apparently neutral elements (the birds) as nodes of a data-retrieving network. This seems one of the new ways of involving people you're experimenting in your work. So, in this sense, do artists have a really important role to play in creating new methodologies of interaction with their works?
I do think artists have an important role to play in showing the interconnectedness of things, between living species other than humans and humans, - yes. And in many cases we can think of those connections as "networks," but I don't think any of the involved elements are "neutral" - certainly not the pigeons we worked with in this project. In many ways, Pigeonblog explored the connections and possible modes of 'working together' between artists, engineers, environmental scientists, data logging devices, pigeons, pigeon fanciers and the general public. Bridging the gap between multiple disciplines, between academia and the general public, between art, activism and electronic tinkering ... is a lot of what this

project was about.

Together with Kavita Philip, you edited the pivotal book anthology "Tactical Biopolitics". During the editing process you told me that for you a book is like "another project"; it's like experimenting with another format (in this case partly in response to the (in)famous Critical Art Ensemble FBI case). In the introduction you stated that you want to push on exchanges among practitioners and theorists "privileging collaboration and coordination with larger strategy-based movements of resistance to hegemonic forces" calling for the inclusion and cooperation of the scientific community. How did you approach the printed book medium? Do you think it's the proper medium for involving the scientific community in the cross-disciplinary process that you defined as 'tactical biopolitics', and why?
Ah, that is a very interesting question. In many ways the printed book isn't the right medium, especially not the academic book. Many scientists probably don't meander over to the arts & humanities section in the bookstore and even artists can be quite lazy when it comes to the written word. So I bet if we were able to see statistics on the "type" of people reading our book, the humanists would rank at the top. That being said, I do believe that the book can and does serve as an important catalyst. People interested in the field are reading it, are forwarding specific articles to the one scientist they know who is curious and open towards the

arts/humanities/social sciences, organizing conferences, meetings, roundtables etc... inviting contributors to our book to meet people they might know... and enhancing the network that way. In the end, I believe that face to face encounters constitute the most important aspect for inspiring, facilitating and supporting collaborations and intellectual exchanges in general, and especially those occurring off the beaten track. The book helps in making those encounters possible. (And of course, like any book, it publicizes the ideas and thinking of the people in it!).

In GenTerra, developed with Critical Art Ensemble, you facilitated encounters between people and transgenic creatures (colonies of bacteria containing a random human genome library). In the statement you said that even though "these creatures were harmless and inert in any biological sense, they tended to make people quite nervous and even afraid." Do you think that procuring these sorts of disturbed reactions should form an essential characteristic of bio-art? I know you dislike this term; you once told me you think it is a "non definition". Can you tell me more about that?
I don't think that controversy and "shock value" should be at the heart of bio-art - quite the opposite. One of the main aims of GenTerra was to precisely get over those initial reactions and gain a deeper understanding of why they might occur in the first place! But you are right: a lot of bio-art seems to have been 'riding' not only the wave of novelty, but also one of shock

and controversy. I really hope that we are going to get over that. Staying on that level simply isn't very interesting. But, just to be fair, let's not forget that in a lot of cases artists are not interested in novelty or any potential shock value. In fact, they are so used to handling biological materials that any 'shock' or controversy has long left their field of vision. It's just, this isn't the case for most people viewing the work and it is often those people who write, interpret and respond to the work.

Your "Cello" is a musical robot that when played by a suitably programmed mechanical arm, varies its performance according to a computer-generated sound wave and to the position of the listener. Its continuous tuning and checking system, with the help of an external computer, is producing very human characteristics, especially in terms of replicating performance requirements such as the ability to concentrate and aiming towards perfection as a goal. Also, the fact that the robot stops when it senses an external presence is reflective of one of the plagues of our times: distraction. Implementing both of them, the robot seems to reach a very lifelike, anthropomorphic status. Are robots becoming part of our environment in the same way that animals are? Are we going to consider them as accepted creatures?
It is true that a lot of people are anthropomorphizing machines, and I don't think that there is anything wrong with that. And yes, "pet machines" have certainly made

their debut already. But in "Cello" I actually wasn't concerned with these questions. I used the   fact that people readily associate movement with life, and responsive changes in movement with intelligence in order to tell a story. In this case the story of a person unable to conform to the right "tune"...

With the Preemptive Media group you also developed "AIR: Area's Immediate Reading", which was "a social experiment in which people are invited to use Preemptive Media's portable air monitoring devices to explore their neighbourhoods and urban environments for pollution and fossil fuel burning hotspots." You did lots of workshops instructing people how to build and use their own devices. This type of grassroots scientific data gathering initiative unveils the almost invisible pollution that surrounds us. What were the most interesting reactions among participants? Was it meant as a tool to raise consciousness, individual experience and participation, or as a potential plan to re-appropriate the surveying of this type of sensitive data by citizens?
People really enjoyed building the devices. I have given workshops involving electronics before, and somehow the tinkering DIY approach always attracts followers. Most people were also excited to use the devices to walk or bike around their own city, so using the device as "bait" to pay attention and to participate seems to have worked. In some cases the "discoveries" were rather obvious (the pollution levels were higher behind a
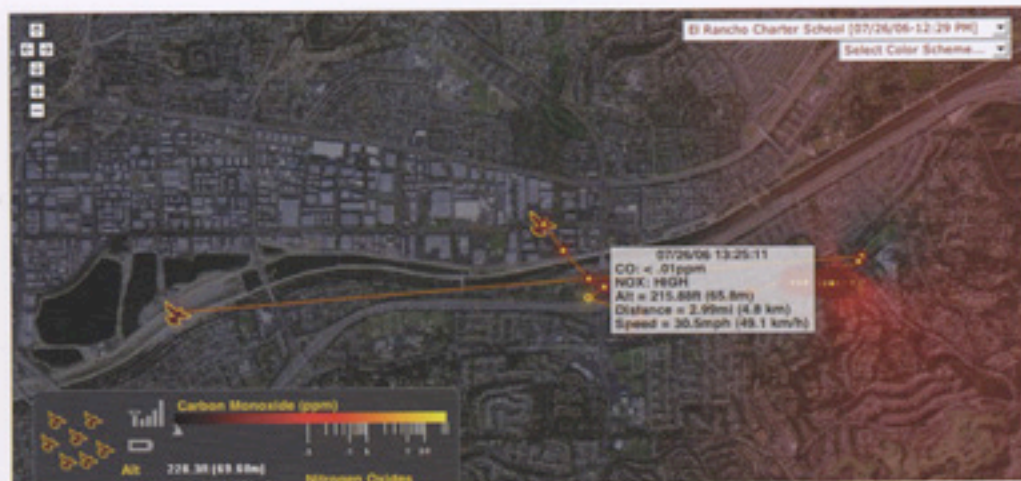
diesel truck then elsewhere) but in others the exploration and the results proved much more interesting and informative. So yes, the project was meant both as a consciousness-raising endeavour as well as suggesting the idea of including non-experts in the gathering of environmental health data. The inclusion of non-experts in activities presumed to be reserved for scientists is an aspect that comes up in many different parts of my work. Free Range Grains, the last project I did together with the Critical Art Ensemble, is another example of that.

"Zapped!" was also developed with Preemptive Media and targeted the Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) standard that is going to be largely adopted by the industry to "tag" and track every sold object. Your various kits, performances and workshops were developed as ways of reacting and opposing another tracking technology affecting people's privacy without their knowledge. Do you think that privacy-invading electromagnetic wave pollution is unstoppable, or could a firm opposition drive industry to invest in something other than desperately trying to (invisibly) "profile" every human being?
I think privacy is pretty much dead and I believe that data will be collected where it proves profitable. That being said, I do believe that small fights can be won through opposition. So while we are certainly not going to put a hold on the implementation of RFID in general (nor should we, a lot of its uses are

really harmless), we can focus on putting a hold on very specific activities. The use of RFID on prescription medicines for example.

In the usual division between hackers and academics, you seem to be in the middle, developing projects addressing specific topics, while working with scientists, amateurs and hackers at the same time. Do you want to embody the artist as a (scientific) "dissenter," as you defined it in Tactical Biopolitics?
That's nicely put. Yes, maybe, but then I really don't know anymore. All this "dissenting" has caused premature burnout! Well, I am kidding..., but only half. Operating between disciplines and activities that gives people a headache to classify gets exhausting after a while. Simply because you constantly have to justify over and over again why you are doing what you are doing... So to be honest, at the moment I just want to retreat from these activities for a while. We all need refuelling and re-thinking and I think it's that time for me at the moment.

In "Experiments in Biosensing", together with Tau-Mu Yi and Christopher Kim, you use methods of synthetic biology to alter the colour of yeast cells and bacteria upon exposure to CO and NO2. This is investigated in order to nurture plants to be placed in urban neighbourhoods that are able to change their colour in response to CO and NO2 exposure. Do you think that this interventionist approach would be definitively more effective than the

usual media campaigns, and that the latter should be completely re-thought? Also, how do "natural indicators" like the one you're developing contrast with visual propaganda created by corporations and governments in urban spaces?
I think both approaches are needed and one doesn't exclude the other. Sometimes people become numb towards news media, - to much information, every day, never ending ... , so introducing other forms, in this case visual/scientific ones to communicate a similar idea can bring some relief, and get people thinking again about topics they might have given up on, or never paid attention to in the first place.

You're often developing projects together with other artists and you have also affirmed that "artists must conduct research outside their "home" disciplines." Can you elaborate more on why and how you're attentive to the values of sharing and collaborating?
Actually, probably half of my projects are done in collaboration with other artists, the other half are just me, or me working with colleagues and students from other fields and backgrounds. But yes, I very much believe in collaboration, especially across disciplines. It helps on many levels. One the one hand there is skill and time sharing, but there is also friendship, keeping each other motivated, idea sharing etc... I find all of those things to be very valuable. It simply allows you to do things on a scale you couldn't do otherwise. And the "must conduct research..." was written in the "artist intellectual" context. So yes, I do believe for art, especially socially engaged art, to be meaningful today, it isn't sufficient to stay within an artistic discourse. It won't get at the right topics, because the self-referential nature of a lot of that work prevents artists from taking an active role in producing works and platforms that contribute to addressing topics of social relevance. Bear in mind though, "research" in that case doesn't have to be "academic research," it can be any kind of research, so maybe I shouldn't have used the term "discipline," it only covers part of what I meant to say.