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Eduardo Kac, Ecrire avec le vivant / Living Poetry

interview par Annick Bureau

Eduardo Kac presented his newest work, *Specimen of Secrecy about Marvelous Discoveries*, at last year's Singapore Biennale. In May he will be exhibiting a biopoem, *Erratum I*, which he created during a residency at the Biennale des Poètes du Val-de-Marne, where he was invited by Jean-Pierre Balpe. He is at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris through June 2007, and in September has a retrospective at IVAM (Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno) curated by Angel Kalenberg. I met Kac last December 15 to talk about his work.

Alba, your transgenic Bunny, is known world-wide, however your work is not characterized by a medium or a genre, in this case bio art. One thread in your work is poetry, from the visual poetry of the early days to today's biopoetry.

I have always been interested in visual poetry, this relationship between how words carry meaning and the fact that words are essentially lines, marks on a surface; I'm interested in what could be described as a semiological continuum between making a line that you recognise as a letter or word and making a line that will have a form that does not carry meaning verbally but through other modalities of representation such as an icon or a symbol. This continuum, this fluidity of the line, was the area I started to work in, not to make the transition from one to the other but to present to the viewer the very experience of uninterrupted transition. In order to do that, I had to move away from the traditional media in which poetry had been created. This is why I started to work with holography, because it allowed me to move away from the two-dimensional page. I wanted to be able to work in four-dimensional space, but also to create something that had a temporal dimension.

Today your biopoetry projects are a kind of return to the origins, this strong desire to inscribe meaning with words in a different way. On your web site there is this programmatic text that you wrote, called "Biopoetry"¹ which lists 20 different very

structured categories for writing biopoems such as "atomic writing", "transgenic poetry", "metabolic metaphors", etc.

It is more continuity and expansion. I have never stopped writing and I have also developed, since the Minitel² days, a body of work in digital poetry parallel to holographic poetry. The text "Biopoetry" started from my recognition, which was realized in the work *Genesis*, that the living can be a writing medium. With *Genesis* it is not only the inscription of meaning, but the inscription, the processing that takes place inside the living and then the output. You could think of an expanded notion of writing that involved the living. In that sense, yes, it would be a connection with the beginning, because the body was central to my very first work with poetry, the *porn poetry*, with the idea of the body enacting the poetry, becoming itself the architecture of language, the body itself was the text, and in *Genesis*, the body of the bacteria, in a way, is the text as well.

There is another thread in your work : the idea of communication and the continuum between humans, non-human beings, and the machine. Above all, the relationships among them.

Yes, two backbones, philosophy on the one hand and poetry on the other. With one you have a sense of inquiry, of asking questions about the world and with the other you have the plastic medium being the object of interest. We now recognize that many things we thought belonged only in the realm of humans, are also found in the realm of non-human animals. This has always been of great interest to me. We had a semiological continuum between word and image, now we can speak of a life continuum or a genetic continuum. Of course, this is not to say that humans don't have a specificity. I started to create telepresence works in 1986 with an anthropomorphic radio-controlled robot. I wanted to further expand that by integrating this being into the network. This is when I created *Ornitorinco*, in 1989, which is no longer anthropomorphic. The selection of that name is already emblematic of a notion of hybridity. But my robot does not resemble the animal, so there is a disconnect between the sign and its reference, which is what I do in the *Ornitorinco* series as well : *Ornitorinco in Copacabana* in no way resembles the beach. This disconnect between sign and reference is also a characteristic of the time we live in, signs float, meaning is detached. You can inhabit the image, and it is what happens in *Ornitorinco*, but you can also inhabit the body of the robot. This notion of telepathy, that I coined, the ability to develop empathy at a distance, is one important aspect of contemporary life.

One could create telepathy through social activism. You have a different approach.

True. Even though these philosophical and social questions are of interested to me and part of the work, my approach to art is not what you call activist art, and neither it is conceptual in the sense that the documentation becomes the work. I am very committed to the creation of works that are rich sensorially, that provide viewers and participants an experience that is not only interesting to the eye but also kinesthetically, cognitively, dialogically. And in order to do that, I have created these living and telerothetic beings and these situations, like in *Rara Avis*, that have a particular phenomenological quality to them.

One of the key aspects of my telepresence work, at the beginning, was to give humans the experience of seeing the world from a perspective other than their own. At the same time, I recognized the fact that other life forms have, too, a particular experience of the world and it is interesting for us to learn from them. What the world would be if art was not just created by humans for humans? It seemed absurd, humorous even, when I started asking myself this question, but today it is taken very seriously in philosophy. I have been trying to create works that are meant for non-humans, for example *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and also *GFP Bunny*, if realized to the full extent that I had envisioned it. The new series of works called *Specimen of Secrecy about Marvelous Discoveries*, for which I have created this form I call « biotope », has a very direct relationship with *The Eighth Day*, with *GFP Bunny*, and they represent exactly what I am trying to say: that the moment you create a life form as such in the context of art, there is something that is of interest to the life form itself that does not necessarily has anything to do with your motivation to make it and your interest in it, because the living being itself has a point of view, a subjectivity. It is a fundamental departure. When you first look at the biotope, it may seem like a picture because it has an image, but that is deceiving, intentionnaly. This image, or the text in the biopoem that I will present at the Biennale des Poètes, is meant to attract your attention. However it is not the work, because it changes in time : the biotope is evolving according to its own interest. The biotope is composed of earth, water and other nutrients in which millions of different aerobic and anaerobic cells (bacteria and algae) are living their lives. They form an ecology. *The Eighth Day* is also an ecology but one that has to be humanly supported in a complex way ; on the other hand *Alba* is meant as an animal that can share its life with humans in a domestic space. In a way *Specimen of Secrecy about Marvelous Discoveries* is a hybrid of both: the biotopes are an ecology but meant to exist in the domestic space. The bacteria are phototropic, they respond metabolically to light. So,

through the image I create, I carefully control what areas of the biotope receive light. All the images have an element of circularity and what I am trying to allude to by doing this is the idea, the concept of cycle, of life cycles. If you store the biotope, it is going to be completely dark, black, that image will have disappeared and then, taken out, reinstalled, it appears again, but never absolutely identical.

Most of your bio artworks are museum-like installations. The biotopes have a more intimate scale ...

I feel that the future of bio art is away from these very controlled conditions of museums and galleries. The biotopes correspond precisely to my current desire to create in a form that is more fluid. You could be living with the biotope in the same sense that you have those flowers in a pot except that they would not have the same ontological status of the flowers, neither of this print on your wall. They can enter your daily life without losing the richness of this ambiguity. I have always tried to create works and models of thought that are not based on a dichotomy. We now start to recognize that a lot of the barriers that once were firm and sacred are going down, such as the barriers between humans and non-human animals in terms of abstract thought, language, and culture, for example. The moment that you can proceed with the living as you would with the computer through input, processing and output, as I did with *Genesis*, we need to have the correlate of that on a philosophical level. Through sensual, poetical, visual, and experiential means, my works have established these questions as a central vector of inquiry.

International Biennale of Poetry in Val de Marne, May 23rd – June 2nd, 2007

Eduardo Kac, mid-career survey, IVAM, Valencia, September 25th – November 11th, 2007

Solo Show, *Specimen of Secrecy about Marvelous Discoveries*, Fringe Exhibitions, Los Angeles, September 8th – October 6th, 2007

¹ www.ekac.org/biopoetry.html

² French digital network of the 1980s, a precursor to the Web.