

From the Fragmented Body to its Microcosmos

Contemporary conceptualistically designed multimedia artworks are often in an intense dialogue with art theory and philosophy as well as with the broader social reality. A particular space of events, where aesthetic dimensions interact with the ethical, new scientifically-technologic, economic and socio-political contents has been opened through integration of art with science and new technologies, especially through research of the body.¹

Since the 1990's, artists often use high-tech forms of bodily representation as digitalized images, installations, and other strategies, which stimulate the viewer to become actively engaged and which build new forms of the intersubjective exchanges. Performativity in the art of the new media technologies, like its precursors (early body art and others), demands a recognition of chiasmic interaction of the subject and object of perception, which through the bodies activates the processes of projection and identification.²

New means of communication, biotechnology, and the shift towards global capitalism began to shatter the illusory stable edifice of Western subjectivity. The increasingly technologized and urban environment caused the exploration of new models of body/self articulation.

The development and spread of the new media technologies – through a differentiation from, but also in close proximity with the fine arts and their spatial and corporal features – establishes new procedures of figuration, perception and interpretation of the body.

If we focus on the artistic work with animate matter or with the concepts derived from the scientific research³, we may see that artists have chosen to approach biology and medicine at several levels: at the microscopic level (genetics), at the macro level (ecological interest for interacting systems), and through the realm of the body, as observation as well as manipulation. We are dealing with art, which confronts our daily life with the scientific look, and demonstrates that our understanding of “reality”, “nature”, “life”, “corporality”, is always mediated with the specific symbolic codes.

With the animate matter a new economy enters the world of art, which changes the imitation of nature with the incorporation of its self-reflexivity. The encounter with new forms of life with the mediation of science is a groundwork for the language of art (autopoiesis, which is the matter of living form as fluid reality, animated from within by the self-regulating processes). We can find the examples of artistic identification with nature through the incorporation by those artists, who use live materials or produce transgenic life forms with the help of technology.⁴

The work of Slovene visual artist Polona Tratnik also can be classified into this biotechnological line of artistic searches. A significant feature of her installations is their perceptive and receptive multilayeredness, with which the artist directs us effectively towards our own bodies. We shall concentrate here on two of her projects: installations *37°C* (2001) and *Microcosmos* (2004).

The idea of installation *37°C* was to cover a sculpture made of an artificial material with the living human skin, which needs some specific conditions, e.g. right temperature. Beside the capability of resuming the characteristics and functions tightly linked to our corporality, the installation also brought a different, holistic perception of the gallery space. There was a leather chair next to the lamp, dressed in stitched latex prints of artist's own body, then video projection and photographs – also with the huge magnification – of the growing process of

human skin. There were also imprints in latex and wax fragments of the artist's body (hand, breast) in aquarium, dipped into liquid and covered with a kind of slime, which contained in fact artificially grown human skin cells. Especially the fragments onto which the nutritive agar has been applied, upon which a layer of human skin has grown, question the decorative status of the exhibited objects, and kept our perception in uncertainty, creating a zone of the indiscernible between the real and the simulated.

With fragmentation of the body, artist blurs the boundaries of imagination and reality, and by connecting sculpture with an animate matter (breast) she confronts with the limits of human body. Here that part of corporality which comes from anatomy, medicine, biology, cannot be overlooked. Microscopic magnification photography is namely also included in the artwork, capturing the process of growing human skin cells that cannot be observed without special conditions and technological aids, not differing from medical observation. Here the artist is confronted by a blockade as a consequence of a specific relationship with new technologies, whose symptom is above all the decomposition of the bodily surface. The contemporary visibility of the body is becoming a field of dangerous connections (between the natural and the artificial, the organic and the inorganic), the potentiality marked by the monstrous and appealing opening of the body, crucial also for artistic representation.

Polona Tratnik strives for the contact between art and reality with the mediation of science, but her use of the laboratory equipment remains implicit. She wants to keep a clear distinction from scientific research on one hand, although on the other her work is in affinity with the biotechnological art. That kind of art tends to observe from its point of view, but tightly linked to science, the fluidity of life forms and to read the language of nature, "the book of life", recorded in every cell of a living body.

In her recent project *Microcosmos* Polona Tratnik explores the realm of our bodies through microorganisms, reconsidering the dividing-line between the public and the private. Skin is inhabited with milliards of microorganisms, which are generally not harmful but rather useful, until their balance is destroyed.

The installation consists, among others, of a bathroom exhibited in isolation, as a kind of incubator, a huge petri-dish, with proper conditions for the growth of microorganisms. We may encounter the presented *ready made* "equipment" daily in our bathrooms as a place of intimacy and bodily nakedness. These elements are also a specific comment on the fact that the content of a ready-made is not an actual object, but its context – i.e., an art gallery or a museum.⁵ The usual sterility of gallery objects is abolished, as the artist makes them a groundwork for the inscription of body traces: the microorganisms are transferred from various parts of the artist's own body into an artificial environment. The exhibits are namely covered with scaffold (gel with nutritive substances), the growth medium for microorganisms. If the conditions are right, they can become visible to the naked eye after a few days in the form of different colonies. But this bathroom ambient with visible, unsettling traces of microorganisms is confronted with aesthetic photographic enlargements of the same sorts of microorganisms, transferred from the artist's body.

The unpleasant effects of looking at the body traces are associated with the thoughts on finitude and decay. A supplement to these negative aspects are magnifications of the artist's microorganisms made in laboratory – colourful images projected on the wall, which are pleasant to the eye. The microscopic view reveals the language of nature, inscribed in the surprisingly aesthetic structured abstract forms, which could be perceived as "nice" pictures, or are related to the fractal patterns as a way of searching for new symmetries in art and also in science.

To see in science means to know on account of suspension of other senses. But the artistic intentions awaken our senses and imagination and pervert our expectations.

The images of microorganisms by the ambient support motivate the awareness of our own bodily vulnerability, and the danger of potential chaps in the protecting membrane on the bodily surface. Touch contaminates sight and makes the act of looking to be the locus of the conflict.

The artist's intention was to achieve with the images some *sublime* effects, on the basis of this conflict. It seems that a similar paradox is present here that was found by Deleuze in his analysis of a film and which was later taken on by Žižek in one of his analysis of fetishism – i.e. how the same object can appear, depending on its position in the structure, as an appealing sublime object or as a disgusting excrement; the difference is not in any of its positive characteristics but is a consequence of an “autonomous” symbolic gesture.⁶

The strategy is thus the following: the artist shows the objects – the bathroom, which at first seems to be very common, but gradually, in combination with other objects (petri-dishes) and projections becomes a place of disgust. We rather relate the projected corpuscles to the realm of plants than to a living human body or life circle – the images have sublime effects only when we realize what it is all about. An ordinary object (ordinary in the sense that it is a part of every human body, but is not visible with unaided eyes) finds itself in a place of the famous Lacanian Thing (i.e. in a place of a work of art, which should be able to recall the phantasmatic projections). In this context we can also speak of a certain confrontation with fetishism of the art world: in order to prevail it, mere iconoclasm or the preservation of the empty space are not enough; it is more efficient to show the object in a place of the Thing and then to make visible its sublimity/disgust as a result of its structural position.

Science and art both have the Kantian aesthetic interest, when referring to the beauty of complexity in nature and to its creative and self-reflexive aspects. The notion of sublime in general pertains to that in nature which transgresses the capabilities of imagination and the life of an individual being.⁷ In the sublime “situation” we may encounter the world of microorganisms, which we can not entirely imagine or represent.

Self-reproducing indexical traces (of genitalia etc.) become icons, images (analogue language of nature) through the photographic magnifications. The chaotic aspect of a medium stand in specific relation to an aesthetic image, where our inability of identification with excrement is activated. An artwork as a whole is an interdependence of both, embodied and disembodied moments, and through its repulsive aspect and with its rejection of imagination, it is sublime. Here we can find the material “other” of the Kantian aesthetic system with disgust to the excremental contents. The latter means the “other” regarding the dematerialising economy of our ordinary, idealistic relation to the representation of the bodily. The idea that an excrement becomes a sublime object drives the sublime to the point of ridiculousness, as an ironic commentary, but is also a direction in which we may think about the sublime in the contemporary aesthetics.⁸

The introduced projects are marked by the principle of decomposition and a specific iconoclasm attained by dissolving matter into microscopically minute corpuscles. We can also speak of the duality of disembodiment (fragments of the body) and decay (the effects of comprehending microorganisms: the language of decay gives rise to disgust). However, the artist wants to make the fluidity between the interior and the exterior recognisable, and the sublime can appear on the boundary and in its extension.

If we treat the work of Polona Tratnik as a recognition of intertwining of bodies and beings, of the reciprocal connection of the self and the world, we may anticipate a kind of flow membrane, which is always in the process of becoming. We enter the porous borderly zone, where traces of the human body as a meeting point between the inside and the outside tend to

become visible. The body is a field of exchanges, sensual as well as material, a space of intimacy and interflow.

Present text is one part of the paper presented at the XVI. International Congress of Aesthetics in Rio de Janeiro in July 2004.

¹ Aesthetic strategies of postmodern bodies in art have brought some important changes, which the theory of contemporary art practices has to reconsider (Italian aesthetician Mario Perniola talks about the sensation of a difference in connection with the “physiological turn”, which joins with other turns – political, media, sceptical and communicational –, and transforms them into something unknown, which is the task of the contemporary aesthetics). In this context we also tend to observe some changes of historical aesthetic notions of judgement and description in the contemporary artworld, such as the beauty and the sublime.

² Here we have in mind the intersubjectivity as *chiasm* in Merleau-Ponty’s work; cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “L’entrelacs – le chiasme”. In: *Le visible et l’invisible*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964, pp. 172-204.

³ By analogy with the “life-sciences”, which are dealing with the structure and behaviour of living organisms (biology, botany, physiology, genetics etc.), we may also speak of the “life-art”.

⁴ One of the founders of this so called bio(techno)logical art is Joe Davis: his work is analysed also in the paper of Marek Wieczorek “The SmArt Gene (Or, Are We Not Alone in Our Aesthetic Universe?)” (http://www.genesis.net/new_essays.html); we are partially referring to this essay in our description of sublime in the microcosmos of a living human body as it is explored in the recent project of the Slovene artist Polona Tratnik.

⁵ Cf. Marina Gržinić, “Does Contemporary Art Need Museums Any More?”. In: *The Last Futurist Show*, Ljubljana: Maska, 2001, p. 78.

⁶ Slavoj Žižek, “Das Ding, fetishism and post-modernism” (1985).

⁷ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2001 (Zwites Buch. Analytik des Erhabenen; § 23-§ 30), pp. 105-156.

⁸ The “ridiculous sublime” aspect lies in the idea of identification with excrement. Žižek argues about that kind of sublime in connection with the Lacanian “Real”, which is this Sublime, hidden and traumatic, beyond of our existence or sense of reality, the disturbing effects of which are felt in strange and unexpected places, as shown in the ridiculously sublime effects in David Lynch’s movies. (Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway*, Seattle: The Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities, 2002).