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Arte transgenica. La vita è il *medium*

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Abstract

This book focuses on the important artistic developments initiated by the use of genetic engineering techniques.

Transgenic art is a kind of research carefully described by the Brazilian artist Eduardo Kac on «Leonardo Electronic Almanac» in 1998. Works and artists listed in this book were selected according to this definition:

Transgenic art, I propose, is a new art form based on the use of genetic engineering techniques to transfer synthetic genes to an organism or to transfer natural genetic material from one species into another, to create unique living beings. Molecular genetics allows the artist to engineer the plant and animal genome and create new life forms. The nature of this new art is defined not only by the birth and growth of a new plant or animal but above all by the nature of the relationship between artist, public, and transgenic organism.

From this moment on, new creative thinking seems to develop offering new questions and solutions to difficult challenges. It is no coincidence that in 2000, the Australian artist Oron Catts gave birth to SymbioticA, an artistic research laboratory at The School of Anatomy & Human Biology at The University of Western Australia. It is a space that formalizes parallels and correspondences between art and science, being the two processes often simultaneous. Indeed, SymbioticA offers residences to artists, providing a laboratory for biotechnological research. SymbioticA is an important indicator of the academic recognition of the aesthetic dimension of BioArt.

Focusing on transgenic art means affirming that the artist, alongside the scientist, is not only able to modify life, but also to reinvent it completely, starting from scratch, at will. When art acts on the mechanism of life, their differences cancel each other out and draw a network of interdependencies.

With transgenic art, nature is modelled, transformed and reinvented according to the will of man and the possibilities of technology. New living beings, animals, plants and flowers overlook life by the will of the artist. They are in fact works of art that highlight recent scientific progress, inviting us to rethink the term "nature" and shifting our attention back to the crumbling of the borders that separated what was recognized as "art" from what was not.

It is appropriate to say that meat has merged with technology, creating something that did not exist in nature and that has in fact erased the differences between natural and artificial, real and simulated, synthetic and biological.

Affirming that life is the *medium* means that art becomes an ideal life and therefore life becomes a purely aesthetic product. The work has the duration of life itself and becomes less and less recognizable as such: it is indeed Yves Michaud who reminds us that in the epoch of the aestheticization of life, we witness the disappearance of art (Michaud 2003).

The new century seems to open up with a socio-cultural slant that pays increasing attention to the collapse of the boundary lines between different structures and to the combinations between various styles. Indeed, the works mentioned witness the merger of the various ontological categories where bodies connect to machines in an intimate or hidden way.

In this historical period, the disciplinary boundaries are being cancelled making it difficult to continue to dwell on art as a category proper to the modern. We should rather start talking about "artists", that is subjectivity of wide-ranging researchers who move away from their respective origins and who are drawing new fields of research.

In 2009 the American bio-artist Adam Zaretsky created the VASTAL Institute (The VivoArts School for Transgenic Aesthetics Ltd.) based in Amsterdam. The School was opened as an artistic operation and aims to make biotechnological laboratories more accessible to the public. In 2012, the Israeli artist Jalila Essaïdi founded Bio Art Laboratories in Eindhoven in the Netherlands being a place to give artists and designers the opportunity to work in the field of biotechnology and life sciences. This is another step to point out the characteristics of a new cultural era: there are no longer disciplinary boundaries, reiterating that art has lost any claim to autonomy and has become a multiple entity, open to other systems of relationship in a process of endless connections.

In general, genetic engineering, in addition to bringing about considerable changes in the social, political and economic fields, is also doing it in parallel with contemporary visual culture. The traditional concept of *medium* no longer has any value if compared to new processes of cultural hybridization, which make the process itself an aesthetic experience. The relationships between art, science and technology are well established and inextricable. They live a coevolution in a multidisciplinary research area, giving answers or asking questions about the idea of nature and the concept of life, thus configuring alternatives for new definitions of subjectivity in a post-anthropocentric perspective.

Although limited, that of transgenic art is an important field of action in the current cultural system that, together with other performative practices, forces us to alter the meaning of what "art" is to us. Indeed, the work has expanded the boundaries of its own representation. It has redefined the concept of symbolic experience to concentrate on life making the contrast between art and non-art more and more difficult, creating unexpected and unintentional perspectives.