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# INTRODUCTION

Sarah Kiernan and Claire Anscomb

It is our great pleasure to introduce this special issue devoted to the Sixth British Society of Aesthetics Postgraduate Conference, 'Beyond Human: The Aesthetics of Nature and Technology', which was hosted at the University of Kent in February 2020. The aim of the conference was to unite discussions in aesthetics relating to nature and technology – two drivers of enormous changes in our world. In this issue there are two original articles that were presented at the event, which touch on both of these themes. In one, an understanding of our aesthetic constitution is sought through an examination of the relationship between human and nature (Parente), and, in the other, the use of prostheses that do not mimic human limbs is explored along with how these affect readings of disability in the context of visual art (Montalti). There is also an interview where Laura Partin discusses the notion of deception in contemporary art with the artist Santiago Sierra.

Filomena Parente's article focuses on the work of the Italian art critic, painter, and philosopher Gillo Dorfles (1910-2018), and discusses his

work on the phenomenological relationship between nature, artifice, and aesthetics. Parente argues in favour of Dorflès' view that the things we perceive to be 'artificial' are really cohesive parts of nature that have been shaped by humanity according to our inherent aesthetic constitution. Moreover, she states that, for Dorflès, it is as much our need for creativity as our need for legacy or mastery over nature that causes us to mould the world around us into the 'artificial' environments that we live in.

The article begins by arguing that the sharp distinction between the 'natural' and the 'artificial' that is widely accepted within contemporary culture is not based on any significant or tangible difference between nature and man-made artefacts but is simply the result of a phenomenological process called 'objectualization'. Parente emphasizes the role of 'objectualization' in the formation of the conceptual distinction between nature and artefact and in the general "shaping of reality" of human experience (2022, 39). She defines 'objectualization' as the "becoming 'object'" of artworks and other items (2022, 42), but states that Dorflès chooses this terminology over the more commonly used 'objectification' to distinguish his position from that of Hegel's. What is more, she asserts that the process of objectualization is also used by people to preserve their distinct identity as subjects and prevent themselves from becoming 'lost' in their natural environment.

The article continues with the claim that the instability between what is perceived as 'natural' and 'unnatural' in man-made objects is best exemplified by works of art. In particular, 'natural' objects (such as tree trunks or beehives) that have been used within works of art or elected as objects of found art seem to present this ambivalence. Moreover, these examples demonstrate how human perception and interpretation can turn something 'natural' into an artefact through the act of objectualization. The article concludes by inviting us to consider the symbolic status of everyday objects, such as Coca-Cola bottles, and the way that

this relates to the manner in which we consider them to be artefacts distinct from nature, but with the spectre of the natural never far from our awareness.

The relationship between aesthetics and artificiality is ripe for intellectual inquiry and Parente's comparison between the two is undeniably intriguing. She has drawn attention to the similarity they share as ways in which the human psyche shapes the world around it, without failing to acknowledge the tension that exists between them. This tension arises from the fact that artefacts are created according to use, whereas our aesthetic relationship with our environment is associated with play rather than function. Parente's article hints at a resolution to this tension, and it would be a salient endeavour to explore this relationship further in future work. Dorfles' work is especially relevant to contemporary technological progress that sees human environments become more 'artificial' than ever – particularly with the increasing prevalence of virtual realities. It is refreshing to hear a perspective that does not demonize technology and exalt what is seen to be natural but instead challenges this very dichotomy as unfounded, at least in its normative assumptions. Such a challenge could be useful for reframing popular opinion of the environmental crisis as something that can be resolved through the use of new technologies rather than an unfeasible "return to nature" (2022, 40).

In her article, Montalti examines the role of aesthetics in challenging conceptions of difference and disability by analysing how non-human traits could be productively associated with disability. To do so, she takes two case studies, Aimee Mullins' role in Matthew Barney's avant-garde film *Cremaster 3* (2002) and Lisa Bufano's choreography in her work *One Breath is an Ocean for a Wooden Heart* (2007), which she performed with the able-bodied dancer Sonsherée Giles. In the former work, Mullins was presented with prostheses that recalled jellyfish tentacles and feline paws, claws, and a tail, while in the latter, Bufano used

table legs that transformed the dancers into a range of furniture and animal-like forms. Montalti draws a parallel between Bufano and Mullins' "merging with alterity" and Donna Haraway's cyborg figures who do not embody fixed identities nor aim at 'wholeness' – they are not exactly hybrids and always "in partial connection with others" (2022, 28).

Nonetheless, Montalti highlights the risk in creating this closeness between disabled bodies and non-human entities - from a sense of uncanniness, the humanity of the subjects may be diminished, as has been seen in the historical treatment of disabled people. As Montalti proposes however, "while the proximity with animals and things does not represent a productive perspective *per se* for disabled people, it can become a critical point of strength when actively chased and crafted *by* them – in our case – in art." (2022, 30) Such performances then, can challenge the notion that bodies are self-contained entities and instead allow audiences to see past stereotypes and find the flexibility of bodies.

While acknowledging that it is difficult to confirm whether such representations result in positive or negative outcomes in the audience, Montalti underscores how "these performances can enrich the imagination about what disabled bodies *can do*; the movements, the embodiment of devices and the aesthetic possibilities in creative contexts, and the ways to inhabit spaces." (2022, 31) Not however, that the aesthetic of these performances offers the same destabilizing potential. As Montalti proposes, Bufano's work, which "started directly from her own experience of disability", is less likely to be subject to "metaphorical exploitation" while Mullins' bodily difference is used to convey the characters liminality and, had Barney got his original wish to have one scene where Mullins appeared without any prostheses, "to embody the transcendence of the body", which entails a process of *othering* (2022, 32). As Montalti elaborates, rather than expressing fixity and vulnerability, Bufano used prosthesis in her performance to display flexibility and

challenge bodily normativity, while her work can also produce a critical view on the socio-economic situation of disabled people.

Montalti concludes her article encouraging further exploration into these topics by highlighting that this work shows the “primary role of aesthetics” in re-working the contours of difference and disability (2022, 33). Certainly, Montalti has established this in relation to the deployment, in artistic contexts, of prostheses that associate non-human traits with disability, but we might wonder if Montalti is also advocating for a broader claim here in relation to the place of aesthetics in challenging these narratives more generally and, if so, whether we can grant such a claim? Consider for instance, domains where practicalities tend to supersede aesthetics. For example, recently Mission Astro Access flew twelve disabled ambassadors to experience zero-gravity with the view to looking at ways to cater to inclusive space travel.<sup>1</sup> As it has been highlighted, this kind of pragmatic mission not only benefits disabled individuals, but also the able-bodied, as the alternative ways that the former operate suggest or require solutions that are useful for dealing with problems faced by all kinds of bodies in space, such as finding optimal ways of perceiving information (via tactile interventions at times when it may be difficult to read via sight, for instance) in various circumstances. Such cases also then, enrich the imagination about what disabled bodies can do.

Nonetheless, rather than diminishing the role of the aesthetic, exploring such cases may also allow us to helpfully explore the reaches of this realm. Consider, for instance, the experience of Mary Cooper who was able to fly around next to her prosthetic leg. Both from the perspective of the viewer who sees this event via photographic and filmic media, and from Cooper’s description of the experience of the event itself, it may well be correct to maintain that there is an important aesthetic

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1 Rose, Beth, ‘It was magical’ – meet the first disabled crew to fly in zero-gravity’, *BBC News* (10 December 2021) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/disability-58902088>> accessed 10 December, 2021.

component to it that contributes to inspiring and sparking ideas about the possibilities of all kinds of bodies. Further exploration then, as Montalti advocates, would be beneficial not only for those interested in topics pertaining to bodily normativity, but also for various questions in aesthetics.

In relation to aesthetic matters, while Montalti outlines the success conditions for the unusual prostheses in terms of their capacity to challenge ideas about the fixity of bodies, and highlights that “Bufano’s performance appears more fruitful...” (2022, 32) on an ethico-political level, we might wonder whether the degree of destabilization impacts on the aesthetic or artistic value of the work as well. This subject is not explicitly addressed by Montalti however, and so it would be intriguing to see further work that reflects on this possibility. Furthermore, although Montalti highlights the difficulty in establishing whether such aesthetic interventions have positive or negative outcomes in the minds of audiences, we could also question (if there were in principle a way to evaluate this) whether, as has been questioned in the case of socially engaged art, this might even affect the value of the work *qua art*?<sup>2</sup>

Finally, through an interview with the artist Santiago Sierra, Laura Partin explores how deception has been used as a strategy in contemporary art practice to antagonize and defy audience expectations, and in doing so to “reveal an aspect of reality” (2022, 57). When this outcome is successfully achieved, as Partin outlines, it can, for some theorists like Goldie and Bishop, mean that deception constitutes an artistic merit, and for others, like Cavaillé, entail that it is ethically defensible. As Partin writes, however, for an artist like Sierra, who intentionally, and often successfully, frustrates the expectations of, and provokes strong emotions, in his audiences in order to critique social injustices, the aesthetic aspect of the works, or “the correlation between two incompara-

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this topic see: Simoniti, Vid, ‘Assessing Socially Engaged Art’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (2018) 76:1, 71-82.

ble types of frustration, between the privileged and the disadvantaged”, seems more important “than being perceived as ethically flawless” (2022, 57). In particular, Sierra, who himself acknowledges that he is not concerned with being perceived as ethically flawless, is an artist who, as this interview indicates, has courted controversy throughout his career for his less than saintly actions (“to repeat the evil in “homeopathic portions”” (2022, 63) as he puts it), to interrogate ethical and political issues.

This has ranged from closing and not permitting entrance to galleries to those who belong to some of the most privileged sets of society to highlight how inaccessible the world can be to those in it who do not occupy such privileged positions, to tattooing sex workers addicted to heroin for the price of a shot of the drug, to provide a “more appropriate” way “of representing the working class” (2022, 63) and highlight the injustices faced by those on the labour market. As Sierra quips, “for a brutal reality I need a brutal language” (2022, 63). Nevertheless, while the former type of action deceives and directly disturbs the lives of those who seem to be largely the target of Sierra’s critique, the latter is not deceptive and has trouble evading questions about the validity and ethical permissibility of perpetuating harm towards communities who have suffered, and continue to suffer, as a result of the structural injustices in society that Sierra aims to make manifest in his work.

For instance, it is difficult to see how permanently marking four members of a vulnerable community (we might also wonder if they were really able to give informed consent due to their substance dependence) to the end of making a comment about the abuse of workers doesn’t thereby justify further abuse by effectively saying “it’s fine to take advantage of someone as long as it’s to make a good point”. One might argue that there is instrumental value in this act but that would be dependent on realizing some kind of benefit for those subject to this treatment. We could ask then, has the piece improved the lives of

working-class people? Has it given those in positions of power a new appreciation for the difficulties faced by those in the working classes? Or has it permanently altered someone's body for the sake of making a point that could be grasped by just the idea of doing it or, perhaps, considering the theme of this interview, by employing deceptive strategies, such as the use of temporary ink, and making a seemingly permanent intervention?

In response to questions surrounding the ethics of his practice, Sierra points to the fact that he makes the details of how he involves others in his practice transparent, which he suggests makes what he's doing "much more sincere" but risky as it can make him seem like "a monster" (2022, 64-64). Does sincerity counteract the effects of such ethically dubious acts? Perhaps, in relation to sincerity and to return to Montalti's point, such interventions are more meaningful when those who are disadvantaged are allowed to speak from their own experience, and not have the perspective of others on their "reality" imposed upon on them. We hope that this issue will spark further discussion in aesthetics about nature and technology, and also the ethics of artistic practice and what strategies are justifiable to the end of reflecting on, producing new narratives about, and maybe even improving, the lives of the subjects concerned, particularly when they are from under-represented communities.





## LISA BUFANO AND AIMEE MULLINS: DISABILITY AND THE AESTHETIC OF NON-HUMAN-LIKE PROSTHESES

Chiara Montalti

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*The essay aims to examine possible readings of disability in the context of visual art, especially regarding bodies prosthetised in unexpected ways. To do that, I will analyse two performances, participated/created by Lisa Bufano and Aimee Mullins, which employ prosthetics that distance them from the mimicry of human limbs. I will briefly contextualize them in the history of prosthetics. I will observe how their peculiarity and non-human forms can serve aesthetic and destabilizing purposes regarding the contours of disability. I will especially mention their potentiality regarding disabled bodies' mobility in space and their relationship with tools. The association between a disabled body and non-human traits carries several symbolic meanings and might also produce risks. Generally, they can update the perspectives on the crafting of creative assemblages that start from impaired bodies. In conclusion, I will observe how Bufano's art entails more promises on an ethico-political level.*

“Is that a person?”

—A bystander to Lisa Bufano’s performance *Mentally Fine* (2010)

Do we have to be *avant* or can we be ourselves?<sup>1</sup>

—Jillian Weise, *Cyborg Detective*

## 1 Introduction

Aimee Mullins and Lisa Bufano presented a similar bodily appearance, but as performers proposed different ways to embody lower limbs prosthetics. In this essay, I will examine how disability can be investigated through performance art. I will explore disability by examining the relationship between human bodies and prosthetic devices, which distance themselves from human forms. The figure of Aimee Mullins – athlete, advocate, model and actress – is often employed to analyse disabled bodies in society and question the design of prosthetics or the cultural diktats on bodily integrity. I will examine the closeness of her body to animal traits as suggested in the avant-garde movie *Cremaster 3* (2002), directed by Matthew Barney. To explore more productively the contiguity of non-humanness to disability, the role of the latter in visual art, and the possibilities guaranteed by prosthetic addenda, I will also juxtapose Mullins’s persona to Lisa Bufano’s choreography, *One Breath is an Ocean for a Wooden Heart* (2007). Bufano was a performer artist and a dancer.<sup>2</sup> I will also pinpoint how Bufano’s performance can ensure more productive defamiliarization to some cultural narratives around disability.

Firstly, assisted by Tomoko Tamari (2017) and Marquard Smith’s (2006) historical and aesthetic analyses, I will discuss the role of design in the

1 Weise implicitly means “*avant-garde*”, and she refers to her and other disabled people.

2 Since she passed away in 2013, I will use the past tense.

prosthetic realm. Afterwards, mostly through Smith (2006) and Alison Kafer's (2019) readings of the artworks, I will examine, what is found to be, their unusual display of prosthetic embodiments. Contextually, I will also recall Mullins's and Bufano's intentions and comments. I will critically assess some features of the characters played by Mullins in *Cremaster 3* (2002): the fixity – confronting it with Bufano's mobility – and the discomfort that emerges. I will also explore them through Barney's aims in the employment of Mullins's body. Then, mostly along with Petra Kuppens (2000; 2003; 2008) and Tamari (2017), I will discuss how prostheses can be experienced in visual art and their ambivalent symbolic meanings. Lastly, I will propose the multiple directions in which these hybrid assemblages may captivate the viewers. Mullins and Bufano's oscillation between humanity, animality and technology can also be framed through the figure of the cyborg, as depicted by Donna Haraway in the *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991). Besides the mentioned authors, the last section will be mainly grounded in Disability Studies.

Throughout the article, several perspectives will emerge, and I will draw out how non-human-like artistic prosthetics can function as a productive trouble with regards to assumptions about disability, embodiment, and about the interfaces among bodies, technologies and spaces. The performances may produce both risks and potentialities regarding disabled bodies. Given the analyses of productive and critical outcomes of both performances, however, Mullins's collaboration with Barney will emerge as riskier.

## 2 Prosthetic aesthetics

Along with the support given to physical abilities, aesthetic features have always been a concern in crafting prosthetic limbs. In the late 19th and early 20th century, prosthetic devices were made “to closely mimic the human form” and, therefore, “camouflage [the] impaired bodies”, making them look “able-bodied, or “normal”” (Tamari 2017, 30). While cosmetically satisfying, the “natural look” has not always matched with

functionality.<sup>3</sup> The trend started to change, especially after the First World War; when the primary aim of prosthetics was to re-direct the injured soldiers back into the labour force.

Mass production techniques and increased functionality became deemed more important and thus a new type of *uglier*, but *cheaper* and *functionally superior* prostheses became made available (Ibid, 30, my emphases).

Despite the variations in the history of their aesthetics, prosthetic devices have always been made with the aim of seamlessness with the receiving bodies “in such a way as to make themselves invisible” (Smith 2006, 51). As Marquard Smith highlights in a study based on the archives of the Science Museum in London, historically, the urge to conceal has been particularly true for disabled women. While male amputees were represented in photographs involved in activities, female ones were often still and turned away.<sup>4</sup> “Female amputees” expressed “a need for continued disguise” (Ibid, 54). Therefore, their images reinforced typical traits historically inscribed in the feminine nature: modesty and discretion. Besides, they seem to be encouraged to “pass for something other than disabled” (Ibid, 54).

While prostheses are “supposed to blend with the human body without being conspicuous” (Vanshtein 2012, 144), it is not necessarily the case in the artistic realm, where particular visual effects are often actively sought after. This new attention is demonstrated by the widespread diffusion of sculpture-like prostheses, mostly used in art and fashion projects. Mullins is particularly active in promoting a creative approach towards prosthetics and participated in some of these projects (cf. Ibid,

3 .....  
Functionality and support of physical abilities, however, are not inscribed in every kind of protheses – for example, prosthetic breasts or craniofacial prostheses do not serve other purposes that cosmetic and aesthetic ones.

4 On the paucity of disabled women in medical representations, see also Ott in Ott et al. 2002.

149-154; The Alternative Limb Project).

A prosthetic limb doesn't represent the need to replace loss anymore. It can stand as a symbol where the wearer has the power to create whatever it is that they want to create in that space (Mullins 2009a).

Mullins also recalls when she realized she could “move away from the need to replicate humanness as the only aesthetic ideal” (Ibid), and then explored different styles.

The concept of prosthetic aesthetics indicates the “approach of questioning prosthesis (in general) in relation to aesthetics (in particular)” (Tamari 2017, 50). Tamari specifically employs “prosthetic aesthetics” to convey the cultural reception of prosthetic bodies, accounting for the conflicting feelings evoked by their images (Ibid, 46-51). In this article, I will take performances into account. I will not merely focus on the possible cultural reception of the prostheses presented, but present the subjects' perspectives, who crafted them and employed them as well.

### 3 Mullins's claws and tentacles

*The Cremaster Cycle* is a series of five full-length movies made between 1994 and 2002. Despite the unconventional numeration, *Cremaster 3* (2002) is the most recent one, in which one of the characters played by Barney, the Entered Apprentice, goes through tests and rituals to enter the Masonry. The characters, often hybrid or monstrous creatures, presents a sculptural aesthetics, appearing as mobile work of arts. One of the sets is, quite appropriately, the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. Mullins recalled that Barney contacted her after her 1999 appearance in an Alexander McQueen fashion show, and they started a collaboration (cf. Inglese 2014).<sup>5</sup> *Cremaster 3* (2002) represents Mullins's

.....  
5 She also starred in Barney (2014).

first experience as an actress, and it is clear that her ‘disability’<sup>6</sup> is not incidental; Barney’s choice evidently values the aesthetic possibilities intrinsic to her employment of prostheses.

I will particularly focus on *Cremaster 3*’s part called *The Order*, in which Mullins plays the Entered Novitiate, and her metamorphoses. In the first version of the character, she represents “the Apprentice’s [that is Barney’s] alter-ego” (Spector in Smith 2006, 63) and they share the set. Mullins is dressed in white and wears transparent high-heeled prostheses. While Mullins and Barney’s characters approach each other, however, she morphs into a “hybrid Egyptian warrior” (Mullins 2009a) who attacks the Apprentice. He must kill her to keep scaling the Guggenheim and continue his initiation. This second version as a half-cheetah and half-woman is endowed with “articulated paws, claws and a tail” (Ibid). Mullins presents this version as “a little homage to [her] life as an athlete” (Ibid), as she was the first runner ever to wear the famous *cheetah legs*.

In the last frames of *The Order*, Mullins turns in a third version of the Novitiate and appears seated, still, while she keeps five lambs on a leash. She is blindfolded, bleeding, has a noose around her neck, and wears a white tunic that leaves one breast uncovered. In this last scene, the camera starts with a close-up of the prostheses; they are made of polyurethane, transparent and “look like jellyfish legs” (Mullins 2009a). Smith problematizes the fixity of the sequence; once defeated, Mullins’s character cannot see nor move (2006, 66-67). This version of the character also recalls the fixity observed by Smith in disabled women’s portraits mentioned above. Also, Stefanie Heine (2014) frames this last figure through Greek mythology; Mullins’s character recalls simultaneously Oedipus, Nemesis and Medusa. Whereas Heine interprets “the frozen image” as “an outcome of Medusa’s petrifying gaze” (2014, 7-8), recalled by the snakelike tentacles, I would claim the opposite. The view of the tentacular prostheses seems to freeze us, the public, who are left to won-

6 Even though I will use the term disability throughout the essay, Mullins would not refer to herself as disabled and proposes sometimes the term ‘super-abled’ (cf. 2009b).

der about the possible meanings of her body merged with tentacles.

A possible interpretation is highlighted by Mullins, who recalls the director's intention. She presents the design of the prostheses as a collaborative work between the two of them. However, regarding the last scene, she remembers:

[o]riginally Matthew had wanted me to do that scene without prosthetics [...] as a way to express the Masonic theory that you have to lose your lower self in order to reach a higher level. I guess the literal representation of that would have been for me to sit on the sled without any limbs below the knee, but that would have been difficult for me because it's very, very intimate. We had a long dialogue about what we could do instead, and Matthew came up with the idea of making the legs appear like jellyfish tentacles because they're not a human form and they're clear. It worked for me because I don't feel so bare where there's something between me and the ground (Mullins in Smith 2006, 64).

These animal-inspired prostheses were, therefore, a compromise between the two of them. Smith raises the issue of Barney's "metaphorical opportunism" (2006, 66); the symbolic meaning he conceived appears problematically based on the old, recurring theme of bodily transcendence and also displays a rather "disingenuous and boorish" (Ibid, 66) attitude with regards to Mullins's missing lower limbs. As Petra Koppers highlights, Mullins is used by the director; he uses her (supposed) liminality to embody a figure "between humanity and animality" (2008, 172). Through all the interpretations presented, the movie insists on Mullins's difference. Vivian Sobchack pinpoints that her figures in *Cremaster* are not even metaphors and trespass beyond that; they are embodied 'metalepsis'. For example, the representation starts from prostheses named after cheetahs and leads to the actual metamorphization of their user (cf. 2004, 223-224).

Whilst I would not claim that Mullins's body is purely exploited, as

I always strive to acknowledge agency, her presence, nonetheless, conveys a certain grade of awkwardness and discomfort. In the first two depictions of the Novitiate, she appears ‘wobbly’ and ‘unsteadily’ (Smith 2006, 66). The last scene, as mentioned, opens exactly with a shot of her lower limbs; reading it through her statements above it is possible to feel her reticence even strongly. The artist Elizabeth Wright reads Mullins’s movements as “indicative of the fragile relationship between the body and prosthetic” (2009), with the latter seeming close to betraying her. Smith (2006) deciphers the ‘vulnerability’ conveyed by the representation as a challenge to “the discourse of prosthesis with its overwhelming imperatives of rehabilitation, empowering, and resolute unshakability” (2006, 66). Smith’s remark properly points towards a refusal of the *supercrip* narrative, which emphasizes individual will-power, overlooks social and economic obstacles, and implies that disabled people who try hard enough – especially when helped by technological enhancement – will succeed (cf. Clare 2015, 1-13). While Mullins’s vulnerability could be conceptualised in this framework, the *fragility* associated with disability is even stronger and often goes unchallenged, especially in the medical model of disability and its depiction only as a tragedy (cf. Clare 2015; Montalti 2020, 135-137). Disabled people are often represented as *ontologically* frailer and more prone to breakage than non-disabled ones because of their “deficits”. In this respect, Mullins’s movements are not particularly challenging the cultural scripts of disability.

#### 4 Bufano’s table and animals’ legs

Differently from Mullins, Bufano was an interdisciplinary trained artist whose experience encompassed visual art, sculpture, and performance art - with an interest in dance as well. As a performer, Bufano “often used prosthetic and props in her work” (‘Info’ in Bufano n.d.). Generally, she crafted them following peculiar forms, both object- and animal-like (cf. Shea and Bufano 2013; ‘Video’ in Bufano n.d.). In particular, in sev-

eral performances – such as *2 Legs* (2005), *Mentally Fine* (2010), *Home Is Not Home* (2011) (cf. Ibid; ‘Work’, n.d.) and *One Breath is an Ocean for a Wooden Heart* (2007) – she employed “wooden stilts secured to [her] arms and legs” (‘Info’ in Bufano n.d.), which she got from Queen-Anne style tables. When explaining the aims and the aesthetic features sought, she recalled how “the dominating theme is the visceral experience of alienation, embodied by creatures, real and imagined” (Ibid).

*One Breath* premiered in 2007 in Zagreb and was performed both in Europe and in the United States. As described on Bufano’s website, it is “an unusual modern dance duet for a disabled dancer and an able-bodied dancer”<sup>7</sup> (‘Work’ in Bufano n.d.), where this second role is performed by her colleague Sonsheree Giles.

[T]he dancers are transformed through a wide range of imagery: animated furniture, magical toys, 8-legged insect, 4-legged gazelle, 2-legged birds. The effect is an eerie otherworldliness (‘Work’ in Bufano n.d.).

Regarding the specificity of the prostheses, while the two dancers were setting up the piece, Giles experienced the peculiar mobility enacted while wearing them. As Giles stated, she was not capable of ‘[feeling] what she [was] doing’ (‘Work’ in Bufano n.d.). Starting precisely from the ‘disconnection’ provoked by the stilts, the two artists decided to “try to remain physically connected in some way to each other through-out the piece” (‘Work’ in Bufano n.d.). The contact throughout the performance is not always a kind one, they also prick each other but never really move apart (cf. Kafer 2019, 16).

Bufano’s prostheses appear unconventional in two ways. Firstly, concerning the material employed: the table-legs are made of wood, which is modest and of daily use. Alison Kafer illustrates the audacity of the

7 The participation of both disabled and non-disabled dancers is officially called integrated dance (cf. McGrath 2012).

## exhibition:

[s]he rejects the logics and circuits of biomedicine in favor of furniture design and art-making; rather than grant biomedicine exclusive authority over prosthetics, she centered a different form of expertise (Kafer 2019, 14).

While Kafer interprets Bufano's work through Donna Haraway's concepts of *making kin* and *companion species*, I will emphasize another framework from the latter. Haraway's works strongly encourage "politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating" (1991, 195) and contest the analyses 'from nowhere' – indebted to fellow feminist theorists, especially of colour (Ibid, 195). As Rosi Braidotti highlights, that means the urge to "[account] for one's locations in terms both of space (geo-political or ecological dimension) and time" (2019, 34). In Bufano's case, the disruption of the medical management of disability, which also revolves around the use of *creative* and not *assistive* technologies, is possible because there are alternatives at hand. Her capacity to ironically employ wooden, destabilizing and useless 'legs' is possible in her specific *location*, both as an artist and as an American disabled woman. Globally, wooden prostheses are often the only ones available. Braidotti (2019) refers to the temporal dimension as well; for example, Bufano's artistic prosthetic also allowed the *desynchronisation* to emerge, which characterizes disabled people's lives in different places. While in specific locations cheap wooden prostheses are obsolete and characterized the last century, they represent the present range of possibilities somewhere else (cf. Riny 2018; Strait 2006; Tamari 2017).

Secondly, Bufano's prostheses are unconventional in light of the mobility they enact, that does not privilege bipedalism. In one respect, Bufano and Giles's movements contribute to the challenging of established dance traits, especially ballet, as well as other dances involving disabled participants tend to do. "The basic movement in ballet is

upwards” (Alten in Koppers 2000, 123), and the bodies involved are “young, predominately female and thin” (Whatley *et al.* 2018, 180), and reinforce the idea “of an abstract body without ‘impairment’ and/or ‘disability’” (Ibid, 180; cf. McGrath 2012).<sup>8</sup> With regards to disability specifically, as Kafer underlines, she “created a technology that encourages or even amplifies the queerly sideways, animal-like crawling we are supposed to disavow or outgrow” (2019, 16). In fact, “crawling”, as Ashley Shew underlines, “makes people uncomfortable” (Shew in Nelson *et al.* 2019, 10).

It could also represent the concept of *trans-mobility*, which entails “the ability to move beyond traditional forms of movement and mobility” and also “the existence of free and disabled bodies in motion” (Nelson *et al.* 2019, 2). Bufano embodies the creative possibilities opened by disabled bodies, and their actual *flexibility*, while, on the contrary, they are often perceived as *fixed*. In cultural narratives, disabilities are rarely thematized as dynamic and dependent on the context. The fixity may also be associated with disabled people who employ mobility aids; they are frequently depicted as hardly moving and *stuck* as in ‘wheelchair-bound’ (cf. Koppers 2003, 8). This representation appears in striking contrast with the fixity portrayed in Mullins’s third version of the Novitiate. As mentioned, that suspended scene ends her story arc, with the jellyfish prostheses working as the focal point of her defeat by Barney’s character.

## 5 How prosthetics *work* in artworks

Broadly speaking, every peculiar prosthesis defies gender scripts. For example, as resulted from Smith’s archival investigation (2006), women had to wear them imperceptibly. Prosthesis had to appear discreet, while permitting the users to accomplish typical feminine tasks (cf. Ott

8 I will not focus extensively on disabled dance because it would produce asymmetry between the two performances. The theme can be further explored in Koppers (2000); Whatley *et al.* (2018); Hall (2018); McGrath (2012).

2002, 9-11; Smith 2006, 54). That idea is even more destabilized, therefore, in performances that centres on disabled bodies that explicitly ask the public to stare. In the artistic realm, when disabled artists choose to employ prosthetics as props, they do not aspire to make them invisible. On the contrary, the crafted parts shall stand out. In these cases, the intrinsic *tasks* assigned to prostheses are different than usual; they do not necessarily permit the artists to walk or grab objects, even though they most often permit them to move in some ways.

As mentioned in regards of both performances, the locomotion is sometimes odd, unconventional and unstable. As much as Bufano and Giles's choreography is described as "both enabled and constrained by their use of wooden stilts" ('Work' in Bufano n.d.), Mullins is alternatively abled and disabled by the prostheses made by the special effects artist Gabe Bartalos. Koppers argues that the use of 'permanent and temporary extensions' by disabled people in visual artworks productively interrogates the spectators about accessibility and also exhorts them to consider different 'locomotions' and innovative interfaces between bodies and environments (2008, 174-175).

As Tamari highlights, artistic prostheses "could be seen to work in two paradoxical ways"; in one sense, they draw attention to disabilities but can also divert the attention from them – an aspect synthesized as "the *invisibility* of disability" (2017, 48). Nonetheless, in Mullins's opinion, her appearance in *Cremaster* invites the viewers "to look, and look a little longer" (2009a). Bufano, too, explained:

I'm not an astounding dancer, but being a performer with a deformity, I find that there's a gut response in audiences, an attraction/repulsion aspect to it that can be compelling (Bufano in Murray 2014).

Koppers pinpoints that works of visual art performed by disabled people with the use of 'sensationalised "addenda"' (2008, 169) – such as

mobility aids, prostheses, and so on – can have a dual function. Taking into account Mullins too, Kuppers highlights how they can be ‘semiotic markers of difference’ (Ibid, 169), and in the meantime work as “seductive [...] invitations into a different form of embodiment” (Ibid, 169-170). The sense of curiosity that emerges, the ‘useful ambivalence’ (Ibid, 169), could engender ‘more respectful’ approaches towards bodily differences and impairments, and “[undermine] stereotypes of tragedy and negativity” (Ibid, 180) as well. Therefore, following Rachel Adams’s proposal, aesthetics seems to have the capacity to let emerge ‘feelings’ and ‘new perspective[s]’ (2020, 698). These performances could open conversations on disability, bodily integrity, and technology, precisely because they are not explicitly thematized.

The arts are a vital resource for accessing lived realities – particularly the realities of those who are different from us – and also for expressing less apparent fears, anxieties, and desires that might be obscured by more straightforward sociological accounts (Ibid, 697).

## 6 Risks and potentialities of non-human-like prostheses

In what follows, I will specifically deal with the non-human nature of the prostheses worn by Mullins and Bufano. Their appearance certainly does not run the risk of normalization, often encountered with standard assistive technologies. In the artworks examined, prostheses recall animals and are even more liminal in Bufano’s case – halfway between birds, spiders and objects. Their movements and appearance suggest “a fluidity between human, animal, plant, and machine bodies” (Kafer 2019, 14).

This oscillation recalls Haraway’s cyborg figure, which insists on “boundary breakdowns” (1991, 151) among people, animals and technologies. Cyborgs embody “the *pleasure* of the confusion of boundaries”,

but they also interrogate “their construction and deconstruction” (Ibid, 150, 181). They participate in flexible mutations, and they are not afraid of Otherness; they constantly compose affinities precisely *because* they do not embody fixed identities. Since cyborgs do not aim at wholeness, they appear to be adequate figures to embody the ‘unsmoothness’ of Bufano and Mullins’s merging with alterity; cyborgs are not *exactly* hybrids and are always “in partial connection with others” (Ibid, 181).<sup>9</sup> Concerning this point, Amanda Cachia examines “Bufano’s limbs” as they “meet the table legs” (2016, 138):

[the] coagulation of forms between flesh and furniture is not smooth, but rather points to an alternative world of bodies that become alive through inanimate forms. Bufano has rendered the furniture anthropomorphic (ivi, 138).

Mullins and Bufano’s embodied alterity is variously interweaved in the relationships with other figures on stage. For example, Heine examines the foster’s passage “from affinity to attack” (Heine 2014, 5) (from Novitiate to Cheetah) as the disruption of the stillness of the sequence, which figurately represents the *norm*. Mullins’s “transformational and transitional figure” (Ibid, 4) has to be quickly killed to restore the order. Violence must be unleashed to stop her deviance, that is, in a Deleuzian-Guattarian perspective, her “becoming ani/omalous” (Ibid, 3). The initial affinity between the Apprentice/Barney and the Novitiate/Mullins, therefore, does not survive their difference, meaning that her transformation into Cheetah. The two dancers of *One Breath*, instead, end up building a strategic alliance that permits them to never lose balance. They embody possible frictions as well, which do not, however, revolve into destruction. The similarity (which does not equate with sameness) between a non-disabled and a disabled dancer also makes us contem-

<sup>9</sup> This point is relevant to every figure presented, except for the Cheetah, which is highly hybridized.

plate us on the porosity of disability. Giles never dominates Bufano as they both try out new ways of moving.

The closeness between disabled bodies and non-human entities entails risks as well. The sense of uncanniness produced could be followed by a detachment of the subjects involved from humanity. For example, analysing Mullins's persona and her roles in *Cremaster*, Tamari highlights how prostheses

that departs from the human form can potentially create ambivalent sensations. [...] This crossing and re-crossing of the boundaries between the human, other living entities and things, deliberately disrupts our capacity to see her as a human body (2017, 28, 34).

Both Tamari as a critic and Bufano as an artist accord a disruptive potential to these multiple and even risky readings; the latter also explicitly refers to the relevance of ambivalent feelings in the artistic and performative context.<sup>10</sup> The perceived continuum among humanness, animality and thingness represents a particularly critical point if 'disability' is included in the equation. Historically, disabled people have been often assimilated to animals in terms of being *less than humans*

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10 I will not confront Tamari's theorization of another ambivalent reaction to prostheses, meaning "attractiveness" and "abjection". In this regard, she actually refers to high tech ones, which is not our case. In fact, she examines Mullins's appearance in different contexts than *Cremaster* (2017, 35). I briefly mention that the concept of abjection concerning prosthetic devices is related to "uncanniness", notoriously raised by roboticist Masahiro Mori. The more they recall human forms, the more they appear familiar to us – though, should they look too similar to human parts, they would be framed as uncanny. Therefore, in Mori's terms, the prostheses examined in this essay would *not* fall in the 'uncanny valley'. In recent years, there have been both critics and supporters of Mori's conclusion (cf. Mori 1970; Sansoni *et al.* 2015; Poliakoff *et al.* 2018). In addition, several disabled scholars and artists highlight how *uncanniness* is perhaps even more strongly perceived in case of 'unprosthetized' bodies, rather than the contrary (cf. Betcher 2001; Wright 2009; Lorde 1997). Lastly, even if Mori and his colleagues' theories were indisputable, at least in some cultural contexts, why should the design of prosthetic devices necessarily follow the general public's backlash?

(cf. Kupperts 2003; Gabbard 2015; Clare 2017; Taylor, 2017; Crary 2019; Lundblad and Grue 2021), or even addressed as *vegetables*.<sup>11</sup> For example, Eunjung Kim opens up to this thingification – this ‘unbecoming human’ (2015, 296) – framing it as a possible anti-ableist practice that values non-violence and interdependence. Therefore, while the proximity with animals and things does not represent a productive perspective *per se* for disabled people, it can become a critical point of strength when actively chased and crafted *by* them – in our case – in art.<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, whereas according to Margrit Shildrick (2010), all prosthetic devices pose questions about bodily integrity, I am arguing that forms which recall non-humanness situated in an artistic context are even more prone to do that. These spaces, as expressed also by Mullins and Bufano, are inherently more capable to let thoughts and feelings wander beyond stereotypes. Their performances can successfully challenge the idea that bodies are “self-contained entit[ies]” (Shildrick 2010, 12), and open up to their flexibility instead – which make them capable “to incorporate what might otherwise be understood as alien matter in either organic or inorganic forms” (Ibidi, 12). Besides, the ‘leakage’ (Shapiro 2011) of corporeal matter, the challenge to the ‘intactness’ (Ibid) of the body and the ‘instability of bodily boundaries’ (Ibid), represent recurrent themes in Barney’s artworks, especially in the *Cremaster Cycle*.<sup>13</sup>

## 7 Conclusion

As it was discussed in this article, it is not possible to trace a negative or positive linear review of the visual outcomes. The peculiar prosthetic

11 Other minority groups have been framed as objects or animals; for example, consider the dehumanization of black people. For a recent analysis see Anderson *et al.* (2018).

12 An interesting reference here, is undoubtedly Sunaura Taylor’s artistic work, centred on the nexus between disability and animality (2017).

13 Despite the title of the talk centres on disability, Shapiro does not deeply thematise how the category may be (eventually) reworked by Barney’s aesthetics.

aesthetics, which recalls several non-human entities, can function as a destabilizing practice towards bodily differences and corporeal boundaries (cf. Cachia 2016). At the same time, it could concur to reinforce a de-humanization tendency towards disabled people. The intrinsic *success* of these prostheses is very different from the ones used in daily life and may also branch off in multiple directions. They can enable specific performance, fit the scenic context, and be propelled by destabilizing purposes.

I have observed how the prostheses can nurture a peculiar and creative relationship with technology that diverges from the supercrip stereotype. The devices appear useless and non-productive in assistive terms. As Mullins explains, “the only purpose that these legs can serve, outside the context of the film is to provoke the senses and ignite the imagination. So, *whimsy matters*” (Mullins 2009a). This view is also shared by Kafer:

These are prosthetics with no medical or normalizing purpose, made solely for pleasure and politics, made from love for the opportunities offered by the odd body (2019, 14).

Therefore, these performances can enrich the imagination about what disabled bodies *can do*; the movements, the embodiment of devices and the aesthetic possibilities in creative contexts, and the ways to inhabit spaces. These tables-cheetah-spiders-jellyfish assemblages are often about to fall, attacked to death and, nonetheless, they find companions on their way like lambs and co-dancers.<sup>14</sup> They unsettle the boundaries between human bodies and non-human entities, both objects and other animals. Disability, here, interferes with the most popular cultural texts about performance art, technologies, human features, spaces, and mobility. The performances invite us to nurture these “queerly sideways” (Kafer 2019, 16) and to experience (dis)identification, rather than alternatively fixate or expel the difference. Therefore, the body that emerges

14 On prosthetics as possible companions see Lundblad and Grue (2021).

is never self-complete and bounded against otherness, but is irreducibly caught up in a web of constitutive connections that disturb the very idea of human being (Shildrick 2010, 13).

However, I have also highlighted that the aesthetics of *Cremaster* entails a less destabilizing potentiality concerning disability. Concerning Barney's aesthetic vision, it is difficult to overlook the fact that Mullins's roles appear to lean on her *difference*. While a character or performer's difference may also be actively emphasised, in this case the result is, at least partially, an *othering* process. Mullins's bodily difference appears quite "*prosthetic to the narrative*" (Lundblad and Grue 2021, 559); her disability is employed to convey the characters' liminality and, in Barney's original idea, it serves to embody the transcendence of the body.<sup>15</sup> Bufano's performance appears more fruitful because it is less prone to metaphorical exploitation and started directly from her own experience of disability.

Lastly, regarding the prostheses and the movements enacted, I have observed how Bufano's dance appears to trouble more productively the boundaries of disability. The wooden legs crafted by the artist herself, interpreted through the feminist concept of location, can produce critical views regarding the social-economic situation of disabled people. Her movements, along with Giles's, are sometimes unstable as Mullins's but are also capable of channelling the flexibility she can embody, challenging the bodily normativity that considers bipedalism the main objective of people with physical impairments (cf. Taylor 2017), and the dance is shared with a companion. Instead, the vulnerability expressed by Mullins's mobility and her fixity in the last scene of *The Order* seems mainly produced by Barney's opportunistic employment of her body.

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 15 Lundblad and Grue employ the sentence in their analysis of *Avatar*, but is also relevant in this case (2021). It derives from David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's theorization of "narrative prosthesis", which firstly pinpoints to disability pervasiveness in literary narratives, and secondly to its distancing from material experiences. Disability is rather employed to convey dispositions of the characters, or used as a plot trick.

In conclusion, by showing the primary role of aesthetics in the re-working of the contours of difference and disability, I argue for an ongoing exploration of the topics presented. Both artists and theorists interested in bodily normativity, therefore, may continue to produce interesting insights on how non-human traits could be productively associated with disability.<sup>16</sup>

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# ART, ARTEFACT AND NATURE IN GILLO DORFLES'S WORK. FOR AN UNDERSTANDING OF OUR AESTHETIC CONSTITUTION

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*Where Gillo Dorfles sees an 'aesthetic quotient' able to promote a right relationship between man and nature, and nature and artefact, the concept of objectualization accounts for the ambivalent consequences of man's appropriation of nature, occurring in the shaping of reality. This concept appears in the arts but also in the production of ordinary man-made objects. The latter recalibrates our own understanding of art and nature. Starting from a definition of objectualization, the hypothesis of an equation between artificiality and aesthetics will be found. Taking into account Dorfles's claim about redeeming the unnatural as nature in its being the product of man's creativity, we will assess his works focusing on the case of the artefact and graphic-musical object. Dorfles's theory will be applied without following the different levels of analysis entirely: phenomenological, since the relationship between men, objects and machine is intentional; functional, as art depends on the role, determining a significance inside social condition, but on a symbolic or formal level, insofar as determining a stable presence of the significance at the level of the aspect, the shape becoming a mirror of men. In the end our own aesthetic constitution will be found together with the recalibration of the relationship with nature and the world through an idea of form combining artificialness and naturalness.*

## 1 Introduction

In 2002, Gillo Dorfles states he could not have imagined the topic of a 'conflict' between nature and man as ongoing (Dorfles 2008, 275). He reflects on a little girl playing with a *tamagochi*, a very popular Japanese toy in the early twenty-first century. She seems different from the one with a rag doll as she performs operations given by the toy while the latter imagines a whole story (Dorfles 2008, 277), exemplifying Dorfles's issue by a lack of creativity. Such examples could lead us to place him among the hosts of apocalyptic voices, criticizing the modern world. Actually, quoting a well-known book title by Umberto Eco (2016a), Dorfles is neither *apocalyptic* nor *integrated*. Dorfles addresses this issue in 1968 in *Artificio e Natura* (Dorfles 2003a). In this work, the Italian aesthetician, artist and art critic aims to promote an adequate consciousness of the 'limits' and 'value' of the relationship between man and nature and between nature and 'artifice' (*artificio*) (Dorfles 2003a, 9). By the word 'artifice', Dorfles means a falsification of the right relationship of man with nature. But such falsification might be better understood at the end of our investigation, when we understand how artificiality is included in the idea of nature by the reflection on the everyday artificial object, among other ordinary phenomena.

For Dorfles (2003a, 162) the artefact is the first element people encounter, making it crucial to his inquiry. He observes that the world around us is an artificial environment, which results from man's intervention as a continuous process that shapes reality while appropriating nature. But when artificiality starts showing detrimental consequences such as pollution, and many critics blame technology, regretting a return to nature, he claims there is no such place to go back to. Furthermore, whether it is a matter of fact that a risk is embedded in the technological overtaking of human faculties (Dorfles 2003a, 35-36), we have to acknowledge our artificial world and release it from unnaturalness with an act of conscience (Dorfles 2003a, 31-32).

By the word 'nature', Dorfles means every organic being. However, what he means by 'redemption' is not equally clear. Contrarily to the nostalgic critics, he denies the 'absolute naturalness', that is a pure or primeval idea, as a myth used for justifying ideologies or preserving tradition (Dorfles 2003a, 25-36). The most relevant example is the appreciation of the third in music considered by the Ancient Greeks as a dissonance for a long time. This example demonstrates that a socio-political system is involved in aesthetic responses and that perception changes through time. Briefly, for Dorfles's aim, a common idea of nature is acceptable in so far as it needs to be studied in relationship with humans.

Dorfles's reflections will be discussed to understand the structure of an aesthetic study on nature and man, in which the redemption of unnaturalness is investigated from outside the mystic and nostalgic standpoint. Firstly, a hidden issue will be pointed out so as to outline the role that human artefacts – including art – have in the relationship with nature. Through this analysis, a key point will be found in a confluence of artificiality (human need to leave a fingerprint) and aesthetics (creativity), which are seen as two sides of the same coin. Such confluence will lead us in the field of symbols, which are the communicative structures of reality. Thus, the redemption will come as a reflection on the aesthetic constitution of man since human faculties give shape to reality. In fact, nature is organic as far as it is aesthetic, since nature is the process of continuous becoming and puts together the metamorphic development of plants and the iridescent vortex of the symbolic substitutions as well as artistic production.

## 2 Moving inside a tangle

Maybe the hidden issue of *Artificio e Natura* (2003) is *objectualization*, a concept used to point out the contemporary becoming 'object' of statues, paintings and musical performances due to commodification and fetishization but also to the critical use of such tendencies by the artists; to introduce the complexity of human appropriation of nature; and

point out man's risk of becoming the object of artefacts and machines. Objectualization in the latter occurrence is introduced in relation to technique elsewhere (Dorfles 2003b). Technique is the complex of the operational schemes we use to implement creative and productive processes. Whereas knowledge is divided into specialized fields, technology, on the one hand, is available to all, on the other, it overtakes human faculties, often subverting the order of things. Due to a lack of intentionality, we see many minds that are unable to embrace the entire operational scheme and confine themselves to the execution of a pre-determined task. This subversion happens also in ordinary practice. For example, in the use of household appliances, people do not know how machines work and adapt their needs, rhythm, and life to the machines' operations. In this case, objectualization is man's process of becoming an object, which happens due to his lack of knowledge and control over devices.

Dorfles refers to phenomenological considerations that cross one of the several "ways of the Post-Croce renewal" (D'Angelo 2017, 152), which enlivens the Italian debate. Even though further studies are needed to better understand his position, as well as touching semiotic and structuralist theories, it is claimed that Dorfles shares a phenomenological attitude (D'Angelo 2017, 164) from the so-called *Milan School*, a term designating a group of philosophers (Paci, Cantoni, Formaggio, Anceschi), who took over from Antonio Banfi (Zinelli 2012, 308). On the one hand, Dorfles is not philosophically formed, but in contact with those personalities. On the other hand, only some phenomenological connection points in his work are found that result from a generational interest (Cesari in Dorfles 2017, XV). Thereby, some of his ideas partially come from this theoretical atmosphere. In our specific case, the teleological and intentional structure of our operational schemes directly reminds us of Enzo Paci, with whom Dorfles has a deep confrontation. A constant correspondence was noticed between their research, which developed and led to a scientific approach to aesthetics by the means of

the concept of form connected to symbolic structures (Cesari in Dorfles 2017, XLIII-XLIV).

This occurrence of objectualization is a moment in this dialogue. Dorfles claims that when we use telephones, scissors and toothbrushes, we are performing a technique that follows an automatic conscience. The question of objectualization is presented as the technique's loss of intention (compare Paci 1967 in Dorfles 2003a, 23; Paci 1963 in Dorfles 2003b, 31); that is, its purpose (or *telos*). This conception of objectualization means that we might lack the knowledge of the 'ontogenesis' of the operational scheme; in other words, the understanding of the sense that constitutes the relationship the world is weaved of. This understanding is the ultimate sense of the concept of teleological intentionality that, according to Dorfles (2003b, 57-77), underlies everyday practices and kinetic rituals by which the body extends to artefacts and devices.

However, when the concept of objectualization is introduced in *Artificio e Natura* (2003) in reference to the relationship between art and nature, man and art, man and nature, Dorfles recalls the Hegelian-sounding sentence that states that, if nature is given once and for all, man exists since he doubles himself. Nonetheless, even owing much to Hegel, Dorfles cannot endorse his position as symbolized by the terminology: the word 'objectualization' substitutes for 'objectification' (Dorfles 2003a, 23).<sup>1</sup>

The statement opens to a tangle of inextricably intertwined intersections, about which little help comes from Dorfles. Without going into details, we can say that the risk of man becoming an object is meant as a form of alienation. Notwithstanding, human beings always make themselves a thing in a dynamic that has to be recognized as unavoid-

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1 Perniola (2017, 168) confirms the autonomy from Hegel.

able and constitutionally positive.<sup>2</sup> Here comes the second occurrence of the term. For Dorfles, man objectualizes in elements of reality to become human and not get lost in nature (Dorfles 2003a, 23). So, objectualization accounts for our relationship with nature when admitting an intertwining of mental processes and material work as well as the flowing of human consciousness in nature and reality.

Given that, objectualization is generally a translation of the conscience. Even though Dorfles never clears it up, we do not think he could deny it. Such a translation is better articulated in the man-made object process of production.

### 3 From the spear to the Coca-Cola bottle

If considered “from a rigorously aesthetic point of view” (Dorfles in Kepes 1966, 4) in our modern “forest” (Dorfles in Kepes 1966, 3; Dorfles 1968, 47) an artefact is a *Gegenstand*, not an *Object* (Dorfles 2003a, 43). It is a “direct and active manipulation of any matter whatsoever present in our surroundings” (Dorfles in Kepes 1966, 1).<sup>3</sup> Man creates it in response to one of his primal impulses, which is leaving a fingerprint on the world, whether it is “the primitive utensil” or “the most refined precision instrument”. Any man-made object has both a function and an aspect, a facet enveloping it, which is called ‘artistic’ or ‘aesthetic functionality’ (Dorfles in Kepes 1966, 1; Dorfles 2003a, 44). In other words, any artificial object is constitutionally aesthetic. Such aesthetic quality is double since artefacts have always constituted an extension as they have an ‘integrative’ and a ‘counterpositive’ value. On the one hand, they are suitable instruments for improving and prolonging the operational faculty; while, on the other, they are part of our environment, where they become autonomous and stand before man as if they

2 For a general view of the issue see Eco (2016b, 235-290). Dorfles and Eco have been found convergent in the interest in the communicative implications of the work of art and in some development of the concept of form; see Cesari in Dorfles (2017, LXIV-LXV).

3 Dorfles’ English essay translates some paragraphs of *Artificio e Natura*.

were an extraneous body, an element to be appropriated or discarded. In Dorfles's words:

the man-made object becomes analogous to that we can define as 'the nature-created object'; that is to say natural element spontaneously born but which can assume the character of an 'object' in the eyes of the spectator. (Dorfles in Kepes 1966, 2; Dorfles 2003a, 46)

The exchange and confusion between the unnatural and the natural reveal what we see as a constitutional ambivalence, whose exemplar case is the artwork. Dorfles thinks of tree trunks and hives used as artefacts in works of art as examples of the pleased observation of nature after man has camouflaged it and made it unnatural (Dorfles 2003a, 44). Until recently, art has constituted one of the aspects of human creativity, which is able to preserve and glorify nature. The artwork had reproduced it and been inspired by it, while, conversely, it had constituted sort of a natural product. Its characteristics were uniqueness and non-reproducibility (Dorfles 2003a, 18).

A tacit equation can be observed between artificiality and aesthetics, both coming from that primal creative impulse; the first becomes usefulness, while the second is its reflexive form. Both look at nature; one to take control, while the other to play with its forms. Without any conflict, nature and artefact mingle in the reflexive forms of our creativity. A game of giving and taking, whose ambivalence is almost poetic.

Only *almost* as, in front of the multifaceted and ever-changing contemporary scenario, Dorfles answers the question 'what is art?' with the idea of a function in a historical and social context, which comes together with its materials and techniques as an artefact that differs from ordinary things since it was created in accordance with freedom

(Dorfles 1967).<sup>4</sup>

Dorfles's functional conception of art is believed to explain the passage from uniqueness to reproducibility by analysing the relationship between use and form. With the advent of machines, they cease to diverge, making the artificial-aesthetic equation more evident. We state that the art-function does not mean a contingent role in society, but an operational vector rooted in human's faculty, that is, the possibility of activating the reflexive dynamic, typical of forms. Otherwise, the idea of artistic functionality would not be linked to a primal impulse.

Indeed, for Dorfles, the passage from handmade to mechanical aesthetically changes the way the man-made-object is produced. If the artisan's final touch was once waited for, now the aesthetic moment comes before the material production with its design (Dorfles 2003a, 45), determining the presence of what Dorfles calls 'aesthetic quotient' in everyday artefacts, that is, a formal quality sensed in things. Contemporary art saw it and started producing collages and assemblages, or still lifes, combining man-made objects together with natural ones up to the sixties, when Pop Art put ordinary things into galleries, intersecting the applied arts and their commercial involvement, and revealing an osmosis of high and low taste (Dorfles 2003b, 157).

Think of the Coca-Cola bottle. It substitutes tree-trunks as there is rarely a chance of manipulating formless materials. For us, it shows how the co-presence of the need of taking control while producing artificial instruments and playing with forms reveals itself deeply aesthetic, transforming the way we artistically leave a fingerprint (compare

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4 The definition of art has to be considered the question by which Italian Aesthetics tries to understand its limits, tasks and status, especially in relation to philosophy (Dorfles 1953; Russo 2010; Russo 2013). Consider the trajectory of Garroni (from semiotic to the non-special philosophy). On this, see also Eco (1968), where he compares Pareyson and Formaggio so as to find a *scientific* approach. Dorfles's position is different because of his non-philosophical background, in fact, his idea of *function* depends on the interest in arts like architecture and design, or disciplines like anthropology and psychology.

with Dorfles 2003b, 234). However, we seem to be moving away from our goal, since one could say that a Coca-Cola bottle has nothing to do with nature or poetry. Actually, it is the right direction as its plastic form invites us to grasp the bottle while symbolising the pleasure the drink gives us by reminding us of an attractive woman's silhouette. The aesthetical game of artificial objects reaches a completely unnatural perspective: the game of communication, where art's freedom means being able to not follow a normative nature, proper to a special kind of animal.

#### 4 On laughter, table legs and musical performances

From our point of view, Dorfles's best example of objectualization is the graphic-musical object *Stripsody* (1966) (Dorfles 2003a, 153), as it includes the first kind of objectualization we mentioned: the making of a performance into an object. *Stripsody* (Fig 1.) is one of Cathy Berberian's musical pieces, which objectualized as both a recording and a graphic book. Its score is truly a visual artwork designed by the painter Eugenio Carmi and plays with the comics pop-onomatopoeic language on the basis of an Eco's idea. In the introduction, Eco (in Berberian and Carmi 2013, 5-7) writes about the noises we are submerged in, explaining that their primitive suggestion works in Carmi's signs, and becoming a new musical language just like noises in comics (Berberian and Carmi 2013).

Dorfles thinks about comics as a metaphorical-communicative structure when it *objectualizes* man in figures. For example, a table leg that literally translates into a human leg (Dorfles 2003a, 94). Firstly, we report Dorfles's remark that, when we see a picture like that, we laugh. Animals do not laugh, so laughter is a human trait beyond the bio-physiological condition, indicating that humans are alien to nature and constitute a second artificial nature (Dorfles 2003a, 85). Secondly, the literal translation (present also in Berberian's original musical notation) and the making of music into a graphic object means transposing one

thing into something else, so music reports our on-going signification processes that consist of symbolizing and finding connections and analogies. Thirdly, the graphic score becomes an artefact, a book available for purchase, objectualizing the performance of the singer. Language and musical events become objects (Dorfles 2003a, 152).

The literal objectualization of a performance into artefact refers to the state of the arts at the time: their tendency to underline the material condition of artistic productions (paintings becoming empty frames, or material brush strokes, or holes in the space of the canvas). Similarly, the literal and symbolic transformations draw the attention on their condition of possibility: human faculties. For us, such a turn is based on the reflexive quality of form.

A step back. For Dorfles, man is not only a rational animal, he is also a symbolic one. Considering Cassirer and Vico (Dorfles 2017, 1583-1612), Dorfles uses a complex concept of symbol. We think that, since the symbol is anything which trades place with something else (Dorfles 2017, 756), it is a model of significant relationship (compare Franzini and Mazzocut-Mis 2010, 202). But this model depends on the inclusion of irrational or almost rational processes in his idea of mind, meaning the complex of human faculties in their relationship.

For Dorfles, the presence of symbolic elements is intimately bonded to human thinking because of a need for communications that goes beyond logic and rationality. Such communication uses more plastic and flexible means that are suitable for experiences, or even concepts, not yet rationalized (Dorfles 2017, 756-757). With no definite concept, human thinking produces significant forms, which eventually externalize human making. In other words, here, we find analogies, metaphors, figures, and images that move through significant substitution and communicate without concepts or with evanescent ones on a formal or plastic level. In coherence with the aesthetic functionality, this process of substitution also happens with the symbolic aspect of the artefacts;

for example, when we crave to drink a Coca-Cola or when the ballpoint pen starts dominating the market by an aspect that symbolises its functions (Dorfles 2017, 758) thanks to a correspondence between its shape and its significance (Dorfles 2001, 51).

Given that idea of mind and its connection with communication, the artificial world around us is a web of symbols and the result of the web of connections that conform to our mind and our hands (or machines). At the beginning, we discussed a web when it comes to the teleological intentionality. Both the intentional and symbolic structure account for the kind of relationship man has with reality and nature; one that pertains to the use of things and devices, and the second to the form. We add that two converging sides in an aesthetically constituted world conform to our own aesthetic constitution. Since humans are symbolic animals, who extend to useful and formal objects so they do not get lost in nature. In other words, animals leaving a fingerprint to remember that the world develops in a continuous, relational process, which is analogical to the metamorphic that becomes organic nature.

### **5 Redeeming or reflecting? A Question by way of conclusion**

The shape of the plastic Coca-Cola bottle invites us to satisfy our need using a significant-symbolic mechanism. The latter was also at work in the primitive impulse to create objects but recalibrates on the level of a second nature; as such, it reminds us of our fingerprint as well as our formal game. If the artificial-aesthetic equation appears to justify a definitive detachment from nature by determining an abyss between artefact and natural object, the aesthetic quotient persists even in the anonymous products of industry because their shapes are able to signify their function, putting the issue on a constitutive aesthetic level.

Dorfles thinks that one has to redeem the unnatural as natural with an act of conscience to resolve the conflict between artefact and nature. In the space of a relationship of appropriation, there is a line between man and nature where the objects are more or less man-made, more or less

natural, on the basis of the specificity of time. The task of distinguishing is ours by singular judgments (see Crawford in Kevy 2004, 306-324).

Such an approach is radically relational since it abandons the idea of a definition of its terms. It is acceptable because we believe that Dorfles has an *aesthetic* and *organic* approach to the issue. According to Dorfles, man and nature as well as artefact and natural object do not have to be thought of as opposites but as polarities that presuppose each other.<sup>5</sup> The *organic* quality accounts for the analogies and metaphors between them, leading us from the life of nature to the one of our symbolic minds. This organic vision is able to identify a negative element in the oscillation between poles by relying on conscience. Such structure seems coherent with Dorfles's view, when he refers to Goethe (Dorfles 2003a, 31; Dorfles 2017, 160-166) and distinguishes the 'artifice' as the falsification that is capable of subverting the right way of being and experiencing (Dorfles 2003a, 72).<sup>6</sup> But Dorfles's approach is also *aesthetic* since his redemption eventually means rethinking our constitution in the work of our mental structures and in the making that shapes reality; that is, an aesthetic work. Through the symbol, which is an iridescent form in metamorphic development and a vortex of analogical connections, an aesthetic quotient is installed in every object as a breach of conscience, relying on a formal quality, which reminds us of human faculties. Such a dynamic was retraced insisting on a coincidence between artificiality and aesthetics. This could have led us to Hegel.<sup>7</sup> However, the only real nature is a pole in a dynamic relationship; such nature is indeed artificial in a deeply aesthetical sense as far as it lives in metamorphic forms that communicate with us.

In conclusion, one has to sense an aesthetic quotient to redeem the unnatural by its forms. Without turning the oscillatory motion, our

5 See Perniola (2017, 9).

6 Or even *kitsch*. On *kitsch* and taste see Dorfles (1990; 2004).

7 We found it, for example, in Mecacci (2012, 179).

thought has to follow into an almost mystical and conciliatory vision of the world and society. Without mysticism and conciliation, the redemption will simply be called a reflection of and on our aesthetic constitution, underlying the commitment of our conscience with a fingerprint, which is neither the touch of the genius nor an abuse on something innocent but the trace of our work, whether it be a mental, almost irrational process, or the production of a new piece of reality.

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Illustrations

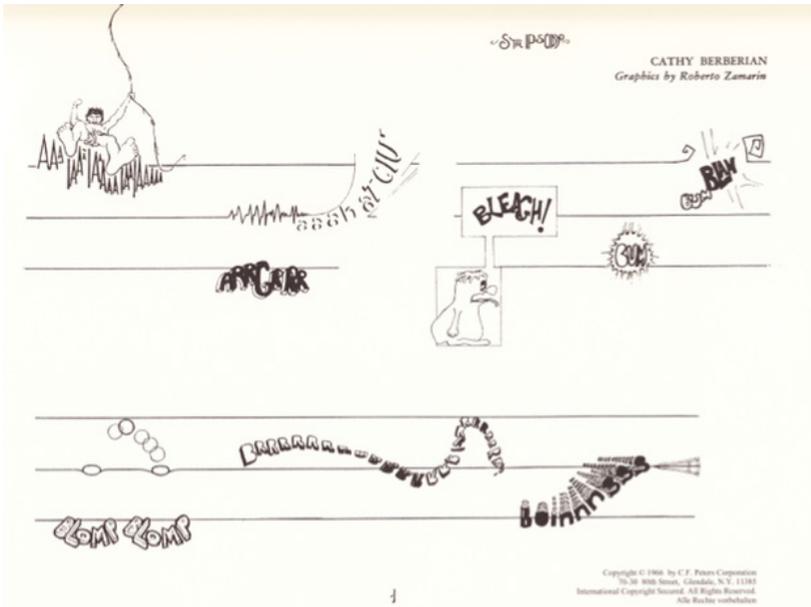


Fig 1. Fplanas24, Stripsody score (Wikimedia Commons, 2016). Reproduced under license: CC BY-SA 4.0. A page of the 1966 score of Cathy Berberian musical piece whose graphic is by Roberto Zamarin, an example of literal translation. The version designed by the painter Eugenio Carmi is instead both an artwork and the best example of objectualization.



# **“For a brutal reality I need a brutal language”. Deception in Contemporary Art from the Artist’s Per- spective: Interview with Santiago Sierra**

**Laura Partin**

## **1 Introduction**

In the article, “Conceptual Art, Social Psychology, and Deception”, Peter Goldie noted a common feature of some contemporary works of art and experiments in psychology: a strategy of deception. In social psychology, deception is used to verify and analyze mechanisms like obedience or cognitive dissonance while providing false information about the purpose of the experiment or while using actors who play certain roles (Korn, 1997), while in the art world deception is used as a strategy to create a participatory practice. It appears similar to an April Fool’s prank or a Candid Camera TV show, but it is devoid of

any entertaining dimension, creating instead a staged situation based on antagonizing audiences and defying expectations.

Peter Goldie mentions Santiago Sierra’s Space closed by corrugated metal as an example of contemporary artwork involving deception. When guests appeared, at the opening of an extension of the Lisson Gallery in London in 2002, anticipating the uncorking of champagne bottles and socializing, they found the entrance of the gallery covered by a metal shutter. Some members of the audience were confused and impatient. After a while, the artist appeared and clarified that the closed-off gallery was in fact the

work on display, titled *Space closed by corrugated metal*. In the Guardian he explained:

It [*Space closed by corrugated metal*] was prompted by events in Argentina where, following the collapse of the peso, banks pulled corrugated sheets across their buildings to stop people from withdrawing their savings. (Sierra, 2002, in Goldie, 2004)

While we know that some members of the audience were initially confused and impatient, one might have reservations about whether Sierra truly managed to deceive the members of this audience. Not all the audience's reactions to the event were documented, so we can only hypothesise about their frustration. Attendants familiar with Sierra's oeuvre, in which closed or obstructed spaces often feature, might in fact not have been deceived at all.

When used successfully, deception can be an artistic merit, Goldie says, a mastered artistic technique increasing the aesthetic value (2004). Deception can provoke strong emotions (frustration, impatience, annoyance, and - ultimately - shame or guilt) and, most likely, without them the aesthetic impact would not be as powerful. In psychology, it is ethically acceptable as a strategy to be used in the name of science, if there is no other available option (2004, 38). For example, in the famous Milgram study of obedi-

ence from 1963, the participants were informed that they would be taking part in a test of general culture as 'teachers' and that they would administer electric shocks to the 'learners' every time they made a mistake, when in fact all of the 'learners' were confederates of the experimenter giving mainly wrong answers on purpose. When the 'teachers' refused to administer a shock, the experimenter gave them a series of orders to make sure they continued, so deception was a strategy that allowed Stanley Milgram to verify if the participants would obey the orders (McLeod, 2007). If the 'teachers' hadn't been misinformed about the purpose of the experiment, they would have been aware of their obedient behaviour in that situation. The results of the experiment would not have been accurate.

In the art world, deception is permitted if it is staged with a flawless technique. In the case of artists like Sierra, who use deception in the sense of deliberately frustrating the audience, the technique is considered flawless if the artist stirs up precisely the negative feelings in the audience that he/she had anticipated. Goldie notices an important similarity between the emotional dynamics in social psychology and in the art world:

As a result of these emotional experiences [frustration, resentment], and of being wised up later, those who are deceived can find out troubling things about them-

selves: how gullible they are; how obedient they are; how quick they are to pompous and self-righteous anger; and so on. (2004, 34)

Peter Goldie is not the only art theorist who has noticed a link between the anticipation of strong uncomfortable emotions and the aesthetic impact of certain participatory works of contemporary art. In *Artificial Hells* Claire Bishop analyzes a wide range of avant-garde and contemporary works defying the audience's expectations and Santiago Sierra's performances are described amongst them. Bishop believes that art can generate negative emotions and that experiencing unease, discomfort, or frustration can increase the aesthetic quality of the work. A work of art can have ethical or political coherence even if it does not generate (only) comforting emotions (2012, 26). Claire Bishop continues:

This is not to say that ethics are unimportant in a work of art, nor irrelevant to politics, only that they do not always have to be announced and performed in such a direct and saintly fashion. (2012, 26)

Among all the categories of deception, the ethical question seems to have an importance for the media hoax and for deception as an artistic strategy only when the actions initiated by the pranksters and the artists have a political dimension of social criticism (not only satirical, humor-

ous), because this is the only situation where deception is no longer an end in itself and becomes more than a selfish move, a joke, or a sham. The target audience, the actual recipient, has the chance to understand the purpose of deception: to reveal an aspect of reality or to “undeceive”, in the words of Jean-Pierre Cavaillé. For Cavaillé, it is only then that the ruse becomes “effective and ethically defensible” (2004, 95).

However, even if Santiago Sierra's work is a critique of social injustices, he is an artist who is constantly distancing himself from a saviour position, who considers that people in the art world shouldn't pretend to be ethically superior, as they are contributing to the same power structures as the rest of the society by hiring people and maintaining the same social order based on race and class hierarchies. If some of his works are ethically problematic and almost impossible to defend from an ethical standpoint, it is because he assumes that the brutal language he is using in order to portray a brutal reality accurately involves the risk of being perceived by some as a monster. The aesthetic aspect of his works, which is the correlation between two incomparable types of frustration, between the privileged and the disadvantaged, seems to be much more important for Sierra than being perceived as ethically flawless.

Many of Sierra's works create absurd situations similar to a prank. His

participatory performances generate frustration, confusion, and anger. According to Goldie's definition, these works have a strategy of deception at their core. For example, in 2003, Sierra represented Spain at the Venice Biennale with the work *Wall Enclosing a Space* (Fig. 1), for which the interior of the Spanish pavilion was covered in concrete blocks from the floor to the ceiling. Visitors did not have access to the gallery because of a wall built at the entrance. Only holders of a Spanish passport were invited to enter through the back door of the building, where two border guards checked passports. Visitors without a Spanish passport were strictly forbidden from entering the pavilion. Inside the pavilion, there was nothing to see except crackled blue dye on the walls, which had remained there from a previous year's exhibit. The deception consists in the experience of people who do not have the privilege of having the Spanish passport - because of the entry ban - and in the experience of the privileged too - they were allowed to enter but the debris inside the building was perhaps even more disappointing. The debris could be read as a metaphor for the disappointment of immigrants and refugees who arrive in a new country and idealize it at first just to later realize the hostile context has nothing to offer them.

When Sierra blocks access to a space, it is, as in the case of Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* or Graciela Carnevale's *Confinement Action*, an imposed

participation. The artist defies the audience's expectations by reversing privileges and compels spectators to become protagonists without even realizing it - or "Spect-actors", in Augusto Boal's terms (2002, 244) - and to temporarily transpose themselves into the social role of the less privileged.

In this interview, we are going to discuss the phenomenon of deception in contemporary art and its dynamics regarding both expectations and reactions of the audience. As a result, we will emerge with a deeper understanding of Santiago Sierra's creative process, of the manner in which he perceives the hostile economic and political contexts he is questioning in his works and of the risks involved in an artistic strategy that deliberately refuses to comply with the audience's expectations.

*In an interview with The Guardian in 2002, you commented on your work **Space closed by corrugated metal** (Fig. 2) at Lisson Gallery in London by saying that visitors were frustrated and angry not because they were deprived of an aesthetic experience, but rather of the 'champagne and the nibbles' that they were promised to consume that evening during several elegant exhibition openings. Do you think that it's possible that sometimes people already expect to be 'deceived' or 'pranked' when they come to your exhibitions, because*

*they are already familiar with your work? So when they arrive they are not 'pranked' anymore, they just appreciate the aesthetic qualities of this artistic strategy, but without getting angry or frustrated anymore?*

Well, this project was put in relation to a reality. It was about the banks in Argentina. They closed all the banks with corrugated metal because they applied something called 'corralito',<sup>1</sup> the impossibility to get access to your own money, because of the price, you know. And I used the same strategy to close the gallery. This gallery was brand new. So the opening of the new building was something that for the public in London was important because it was an open invitation to be together and to see how the new space is, there was a lot of curiosity to know it and to be together. And I decided to frustrate these desires. I was putting in relation these two kinds of frustrations: the frustration of the first world, trying to socialize and to get friends in the art scene and the real frustration of poorer countries with their own problems. [...] I don't think that people... When the people come to see my shows they know what they are going to find in my shows. Maybe it's not this aesthetic experience. So may-

be it's this socialization and this idea of having some fun that they are waiting for. But in this case yes, because it was the opening. It was more for the occasion to see the space of Lisson Gallery.

*So you think that people who came to see your exhibition were already familiar with your work or they were just curious about the opening of this new gallery?*

Some of them yes. But most of them ... [thinks] It was a big event in London, you know? So many people didn't come for me but to see the new space.

*Did you notice that some of them were frustrated and angry?*

Yes, somebody put a graffiti on the walls, somebody said they don't want to come back again to Lisson Gallery. I don't know, people get angry very easily in the art scene, so...

*What did they write on the wall?*

I don't remember but somebody wrote something obscene. I don't know, something against me and against the gallery.

*Okay, so there was a strong reaction.*

Yes, from some of them. From others who know me... They were

more like: "Okay. One more time Santiago did something."

*Correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems in many of your works you're attempting to create situations that 'deceive' the public, by defying their expectations. Sometimes your strategy seems quite similar to a prank by candid camera, the only tactical difference being that in a TV show the truth, the hidden camera, and the prank are always unveiled at the end and this way the negative reactions are shifting, they become positive, there is always this moment of relief and catharsis at the end. In your works, I don't know if this cathartic moment exists or if it functions the same way. Do you consider negative reactions like frustration, anger, boredom, or confusion as an indicator of a successful deceptive artistic strategy? If so, how do you measure those negative reactions? Are you interested in observing the way people respond to these challenging situations and the way their expectations shape these reactions?*

Well, you know, there are lots of art works and a lot of the entertainment industry dedicated to make the people have fun and I think it's not in my character to do that. I like an artwork that creates prob-

lems, that questions something. And I often treat the public of art as a bit of an enemy, because I often treat them as a representative of a social status, of... [thinks] You know, for example when I closed the entrance of the Spanish pavilion. I was seeing people as directors of museums with all of their visas... they are privileged people ... it was terribly funny for me to close them the door. I think it was interesting also for them to experience something that they never experience in their lives, you know, in their entire lives. It is something that working-class people like foreigners experience all the time at the border. You always have this big difference between poor countries and our countries. I was talking about that: the possibility to not enter and the possibility to not get out. Many people just can't get out of their reality, you know? And I was trying to put this kind of sensation in the art scene. For us, art spaces are beautiful spaces where people have fun and expand their knowledge and I was trying to betray this kind of reality.

*Okay, so yeah, that brings me to my next question. After the frustrating moment, is there a moment of understanding the concept behind the 'deception' and the political 'underlayer' of the work*

*from the part of the public? Did you ever notice this type of deeper and later reaction among the visitors? Do you feel like the temporary underprivileged situation that you are sometimes creating through your participatory works (like **Wall Enclosing a Space** from 2003) is making visitors understand and sympathize with those who are permanently underprivileged, stigmatized, or oppressed? Or maybe you're just not interested in that? But I suppose you are, because as you said, you are already assuming that people who participate in these situations are privileged people.*

Yes, of course, there are different levels. Not everybody has the same mind, not everybody is the same. They are representatives of a society but not all of them are the same people. I think that in general terms my work functions as a quick poison and a slow medicine. The first reaction used to be the most angry and expressive reactions and with the time, over years, I received all kinds of reactions. For example, I remember this piece in a synagogue in Stommeln.<sup>2</sup> The first reaction was to burn me. To burn me and my work, you know? To set me and the exhibition on fire, it was a very angry reaction. And afterwards

people understood that it was something deeper than that. And slowly I learned that this is the way it works.

*At first it was perceived as anti-Semitic?*

Antisemitic? Mmm... I think that it was rather perceived as too much...

*As too provocative?*

Much too provocative or maybe as a lack of respect. Maybe they didn't think that I was anti-Semitic, but they thought that I was going too far. Usually, in this kind of show, there's more of a commemorative action. My intention was to convey the agony of something as important as 6 million people killed, so it had to be told with a lot of anger, in a very strong way, not just as something fun, like a monument. It was against the banalization of the memory of the Shoah. The persecution of not only Jews, but also gypsies, gays, communists, anarchists, many people, you know, by this regime. I wanted to create tension. But when you create tension afterwards you have to wait for the results. And the results can be against you. At times it's the messenger who becomes

responsible for the horror we are talking about.

*The first reaction to this work was anger: some people got offended by it because it was too provocative. Could you give me a bit more detail? Were there some organizations that reacted or some groups of people? How did they manifest their anger, did they write articles criticizing it or...?*

Basically, the press, the international press. It was very easy to see it as a provocation or as an attack. "Radical artist transforms synagogue in a gas chamber". You write *that* in an article without explaining any more...

*Without any details about the concept of the work...*

You can imagine that many people every year go to Germany to talk about this [the commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust] and they get really tired. And sometimes they use the opportunity to get their revenge. The saddest reaction was that of a representative of the Hebrew community in Germany. I just called him, I called the Synagogue of Cologne who was the voice of these people.

I went to them and well, things calmed down.

*You explained your work and they understood?*

Yes, in the beginning they reacted very seriously. They were surprised when I called them and made an appointment with them. After this appointment everything became sincere. They understood. So sometimes contemporary art is not a film, it's not a picture, sometimes it's like it is, a strong way of expression. Which is what I prefer. I don't like to go to an opening to get bored or to know about something I'm not interested in. I prefer something powerful. So, in a way it's like conceptual expressionism or something like that.

*Do you consider that in contemporary art, moral or ethical judgment is still relevant? Also, do you consider that political works like yours should be grasped as a metaphorical ethical critique of a cruel, unjust society? That through a kind of shocking, provoking mimesis of oppression you are in fact highlighting an unethical economic system? It is a kind of realistic mimesis of oppression, right, what you are doing through some of*

*your works?*

Well, it's to repeat the evil in "homeopathic portions" [laughs] in order to recreate a situation that is uncomfortable for all of us. I also use art to make it look worse than it is. It's just my way of treating the problematic.

*When you paid heroin addicted sex workers to have their backs tattooed for the price of a heroin shot,<sup>3</sup> were you more interested in highlighting the absurdity or the cruelty of the labour market, where our bodies can temporarily belong to someone else in exchange for money, the fact that they were poor and desperate, or did you just want to show their strong addiction? When it comes to delegated performance, it seems to me that permanent alterations of the body have a new ethical dimension that wasn't present in the performance art of the '60's or '70's when artists were almost always using their own bodies as a "medium".*

Well, it was a representation of the workers. If you go to Russia you will see in Moscow these fantastic monuments of the workers with muscles, in heroic positions, looking to the infinite, looking at the sky. I think my way of representing the working class is more appropriate. I am just trying to talk about

the war of workers. I put in relation the worker with the necessity of getting drugs. I put in relation the worker with the punishment because to work is a kind of punishment. I put the worker in relation with the hooker, with the soldier... and of course, it's not going to be very well accepted. Because everybody wants to believe that there is justice in the world of the workers. People prefer to see the representation of the worker as in Russia on the communist monuments than in my ... desperate way of explaining it [laughs]. The real situation, you know? What you have in the real world... there are crowds of millions and millions of people who had to sell their intelligence, their body, and their lives just to get money to continue selling their bodies, their intelligence, and their lives. Not for any more profit. This is a truth had to be told, accepting the brutality of the reality. And for a brutal reality I need a brutal language. I don't find any better way to explain it. You have to be as brutal as reality is. And many people feel a discomfort or many people see this as an aggression of some sort, as something coming from a cynical person. It's because they never worked in their entire life. Or they work in easy jobs as intellectuals or... If you go to the MoMA museum in New York, you

will see that the top floor is where the director and the intellectuals work, all of them are Europeans, coming from European origins, in exhibition rooms you'll find mixed race people, especially Latin people or people from Italy and then the colour becomes a little bit darker and then you go downstairs and you find the people working in the montage of the shows, as workers, as people who work in the storage, the boxes... there you will see black people, from the poor neighbourhoods of New York. And this is a reality, if I talk about this reality I will be called racist. And it's tricky because I'm just talking about what they have in their own museum.

*When you did 160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People were there people present to the performance? How did the public react to this?*

No, they were not present in fact. I did this performance, I don't know on how many people in Old Havana, in Cuba. There it was terribly easy because people do whatever you want for a couple of dollars. The maximum salary... if you're a doctor you get 30 dollars a month. 30 dollars is what I spend taking a lunch, right? When I was invited to do the same in Madrid and I

said "I can only make it with the lowest level of workers that exist in Spain". What is the lower, the lower, the lower? Women working in prostitution and addicted to heroin. With these people it was possible to do it, to make it real, because they are desperate for some money, for a dope. I did it with a museum, a Hispanic museum that didn't want to pay, they said that Spain doesn't pay hookers and doesn't pay drugs. So, I did it on my own in another place in Salamanca and then showed the recording in the museum [*El Gallo Arte Contemporáneo* in Salamanca, Spain]. The reaction inside the institution was against me. Similarly, from the public, the first reaction was to accuse me of being part of this exploitation of the people, but in reality what I'm part of is the re-civilization of reality.

*You're just highlighting this injustice, the cruelty that is already out there in the world.*

Are we going to accept Pablo Picasso's *Ladies from Avignon*? Picasso doesn't tell how much he pays these ladies to pose for him for hours or... he doesn't give many details that made this piece acceptable. In my case I say all the details that made the piece acceptable. I think it's much more

sincere what I'm doing but there is more risk involved as I can become for many people a monster.

## 2 Conclusions

As Sierra himself mentioned in the interview, contemporary art lovers who are very familiar with his work are not emotionally affected anymore by his strategy of obstruction because their expectations evolved over time. So, as we suspected, deception only functions with a certain category of the audience: the one that is not familiar with his practice beforehand.

The phenomenon of deception in contemporary art finds a strong, at first negative, echo in the categories of audience who are not familiar with a (so-called) trickster's work.<sup>4</sup> We could also observe that this contemporary artistic technique, having the potential to generate deception, is successful if the situation staged by the artist shows a certain precision in the conception and anticipation of the context and the appropriate time - which is what Bourriaud would call 'accuracy':

With respect to this re-centering of aesthetics towards a mode where forms are instrumental, how can the quality of the works thus produced be measured? [...] What, for want of a better word, one often calls the "beauty" of an artwork is only in most cases the translation in everyday language of a feeling

of accuracy which strikes us: the adequate form to convey a singular vision of the world, a precise handling of one's tools. Relevance in the current aesthetics debate, relevance in the period in which it arises. (2003, 102)

The spatio-temporal context must be well chosen before the event. This way the audience comes with certain expectations and does not realize until the end what is actually happening.

According to Goldie, the deceptive situation must be planned without blunders, impeccably, in order to have the desired aesthetic effect. Goldie's analogy between the two fields regarding the ethical or aesthetic acceptability of deception makes a lot of sense, with one exception. In experimental social psychology one can immediately verify the 'necessity' of this strategy. In the artistic field we can analyze whether the work is executed in a clumsy way, but we cannot verify whether there are alternatives or not. The aesthetic evaluation of a work cannot depend on the 'necessity' of deception, as Goldie argues. In social psychology there are certain experimental conditions, which the participants must respect in order to be able to determine whether they react according to expectations or not, in those situations carefully staged by psychologists. Without deception, cognitive bias, obedience, or conformism, stereotypes would be impossible to quantify. So the

'necessity' of deception for scientific and educational purposes is clear and ethically justifies the process.

In contemporary art, one can accept the possibility of deception as a factor that can increase the artistic value of a work (without it being vital). Artists like Santiago Sierra focus on the role of art as a form of strong social critique, not that of an aesthetic delight. We can talk about aesthetics in the case of his practice, but the evaluation or analysis of his approaches will be based on other types of criteria than the visual ones. In order to practice an artistic social critique and stay unpredictable, a contemporary artist needs to have a strategy that makes a strong impression on the audience. As Goldie had said about it, deception can be an artistic merit when the deceptive situation is "intentional and is carefully planned and executed" (2004, 34). With the risk of being sometimes perceived as cynical, artists like Sierra deliberately provoke strong emotions like frustration or impatience by re-creating uncomfortable socio-economic contexts, in order to obtain a powerful aesthetic impact.

*Interview conducted by video conference, in English 8th of June, 2020*

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## Endnotes

1 'Corralito' was the informal name given to the economic measures taken in Argentina in 2001, when the access to bank accounts was restricted for one year because of a devaluation of the national currency.

2 *243m3* was a work by Santiago Sierra that took place in 2006 at the Stommel Synagogue in Pulheim, Germany. The building is secularized and used as a memorial. Every year different artists are invited to pay tribute to victims of the Holocaust. Sierra temporarily transformed the space into a room similar to a gas chamber, by pumping the carbon monoxide produced by the engines of six running cars into the sealed-off space. Members of the audience were able to visit the exhibition, wearing gasmasks and escorted by a firefighter.

3 *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People ...* is a video documenting an action that took place at El Gallo Arte Contemporáneo in Salamanca, Spain in December 2000. The artist's text explains: 'Four prostitutes addicted to heroin were hired for the price of a shot of heroin to give their consent to be tattooed. Normally they charge 2,000 or 3,000 pesetas, between 15

and 17 dollars, for fellatio, while the price of a shot of heroin is around 12,000 pesetas, about 67 dollars.'

4 Jean Fisher uses the term 'trickster' for the strategy of Santiago Sierra (she gives the same example as Goldie, the closing the Lisson gallery in London) or Francis Alÿs and other artists such as Jesusa Rodriguez or Guillermo Gomez-Pena. Fisher defines the 'trickster' as a subversive representative of indeterminacy and collective renewal through the conversion of social discourse, as a figure that transcends culture and history. Fisher perceives these tactics as but at the same time absurd, surreal, or satirical reactions to hostile political contexts (2015, 62).

Illustrations



Fig 1. Santiago Sierra, *Wall Enclosing a Space*, 2003. Image courtesy of the artist.



Fig 2. Santiago Sierra, *Space closed by corrugated metal*, 2002. Image courtesy of the artist.

# Notes on Contributors

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graduated *cum laude* in Philosophical Science at the University of Naples "Federico II" (Italy) with a thesis in Aesthetics entitled *Andy Warhol, 1962. An analysis of Two Acrylics and of the Aesthetological Problems They Rise* after taking a Piano degree. Her current research is focused on the Italian aesthetician Gillo Dorfles with the aim of detecting and examining the unseen theoretical issues of his manifold and multidisciplinary enquiry. Her research interests are in Aesthetics, Philosophy of art, Music and Popular culture.

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has a bachelor's degree in graphic design and a master's degree in the theory of contemporary art. After her master's studies, in 2012, she

obtained a scholarship in Venice at the Romanian Institute of Culture and Humanistic Research, thus continuing her artistic practice and the research project started during her master's degree, titled "The Aesthetics of Deception". The research, which is at the moment being developed as a thesis at Paris 8 University, consists in a parallel between certain contemporary art works and experiments in social psychology, as well as a genealogy of deception in the avant-garde movements of the 20th century. Its starting point of the research is an article by the British philosopher Peter Goldie titled "Conceptual art, social psychology and deception". The term "deception" refers to the expectations of the audience, deliberately bewildered in certain contexts. Certain contemporary art works and social psychology experiments have this necessary deception of the audience or participants in common. The similarity is the effect of the event on the audience and the reactions that reveal a social reality or recurring psychological mechanisms.

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