

## The Whale, the Cockroach and the Rabbit

The planet is shrinking and becoming hotter and hotter, both politically and psychologically. Peace is hotter than war. Global scale conflicts are becoming interminable, undermining the *Zeitgeist* and humanity's confidence in its future.

Like everyone else, artists share part of the responsibility. But they can also provide a new stimulus by heralding a new age and assisting in its birth.

The spirit always tends to lag behind matter and events. But art, allied to the unconscious, has at times been able to predict emergencies. It is not so much the intensity of the collaboration between art and money which is specific to our age as the apparent passiveness of the creative spirit, and the intellectual and moral weakness of the favourites of the day. Just think back to of the times when enlightened, visionary princes frequented artists like Da Vinci, Michelangelo or El Greco. Today's princes are dwarves or abstractions. The major states seem to be run by *minus habens*, or by anonymous forces, the "invisible hands" of mathematically calculated financial speculation. Power holds art in contempt—with the exception of course of the art of armoured safes and bank vaults, the art of the auctioneers and art galleries, i.e. art which has been sanctified by money. Art has either fallen asleep or is deluding itself, and this at a time when the world is going through a process of unprecedented change.

In view of this surprising state of affairs, one is bound to ask the question: But where on earth has the spirit of the age gone to?

By way of illustration of art's heedless slumbers, let me quote three metaphors which are exemplary of contemporary artistic research: virtual immersion, net art and transgenic art.

Virtual immersion and its uterine, quietist charms are reminiscent of an ancient biblical metaphor, Jonas and the *whale*. Jonas artists are in abundance today: they prefer the comfort of the whale's belly, while Ninive is threatened more than ever before.

Net art generates an infinite number of images and a plethora of planetary connections. It proliferates like the locust – which brings us to another biblical metaphor: the seven plagues of Egypt. Contrary to all appearances, this prolific plague is in fact extremely fragile. Net art is ephemeral. Although global in scope, it is merely fleeting in nature. Can such a precarious form of art leave its bearing on "global conflicts"? That is doubtful. On the other hand, it has all the necessary characteristics of the victim or the scapegoat. This is why the metaphor of the *cockroach* seems more appropriate in this context. The cockroach also proliferates, but it more resistant than the locust. It is therefore destined to become an excellent *ersatz* of the World Wide Web, and to ensure its future as well as that of art in the catacombs of the future.

Finally, we shall turn to the idea of transgenic art.<sup>1</sup> Transgenic art does not shy from dreaming of a reincarnation of art in life itself. The example of the *bunny* will serve to illustrate just to what extent this idea may be both frivolous and fascistic.

## The Whale

All things considered, it seems to me that we are going through a period reminiscent of the 1930s, the rise of the Nazis and the fascists, marked by the indifference of intellectuals and "liberal" artists. An essay by George Orwell, *Inside the Whale*<sup>2</sup>, written in 1940, helps us recapture the spirit of this time of resignation in the face of rising perils.

In this essay, George Orwell devotes a fairly lengthy passage to an analysis of Henry Miller's novel, *The Tropic of Cancer*. Orwell reproaches Miller for concluding his book with a "mystical acceptance of thing-as-it-is" attitude. And he continues: "Only what is he accepting? (...) Not an epoch of expansion and liberty, but an epoch of fear, tyranny, and regimentation. To say 'I accept' in an age like our own is to say that you accept concentration camps, rubber truncheons, Hitler, Stalin, bombs, aeroplanes, tinned food, machine guns, putsches, purges, slogans, Bedaux belts, gas masks, submarines, spies, provocateurs, press censorship, secret prisons, aspirins, Hollywood films, and political murders." This, according to Orwell, is Miller's attitude. Today, just like Miller, many of us are guilty of "accepting".

According to Orwell, "the whale's belly is simply a womb for an adult." "There you are in the dark, cushioned space that exactly fits you, with yards of blubber between yourself and reality, able to keep you up an attitude of the completest indifference, no matter *what* happens. A storm that would sink all the battleships in the world would hardly reach you as an echo. (...) Short of being dead, it is the final, unsurpassable stage of irresponsibility."

Now is the belly of the whale a stomach, a uterus, a vagina, or a type of air raid shelter? Opinions differ<sup>3</sup>. But what is striking in Orwell's interpretation of Miller's interpretation of Huxley's comments on El Greco is that he chooses to avoid any allusion to the burns caused by concentrated gastric fluids, uterine contractions, or the attractions of the vagina, and only retains the quietism of the biblical metaphor.<sup>4</sup> For Orwell, the figure of Jonas is that of a man who accepts being "swallowed" by remaining "passive", and thus becomes "a passive acceptor of evil". Miller is the Jonas of the 1930s, whom Orwell refuses to imitate.

It seems to me that the metaphor of Jonas and the whale—in its Orwellian interpretation—also fits virtual art and its "immersion" mechanisms very well. The CAVE system is a kind of whale which is ready to swallow us and make us the passive accomplice of the state of the world. Virtual reality is a whale which envelopes us with several metres of muffling blubber, stifling the cries of the suffering of the peoples, or the bullet fire of the Kalachnikovs. Only rare exceptions confirm this rule, works such as Maurice Benayoun's *World Skin, a Photo-Safari in the Land of War* (1997), which precisely places the "memory" of war and not its "simulation", at the centre of the virtual uterus. To be more precise, it is a question of "blotting out the memory." "In this case photography is an obliterating weapon," writes Benayoun. "We take photos. By this gesture—aggression followed by the pleasure of sharing—we tear the skin off the world. It becomes a trophy and our glory is magnified the more the world disappears. (...) Living beings are the tourists of death. If art is a serious game, war is another. A game which engages the body like a question incessantly hammered out on the reduction of being to the wrapping. (...) War is a dangerously interactive collective work." This is well-intended. But the metaphors of the "game" or the "work" are deceptive. Can it really be said that war is a "serious game", or a "collective work"? ....as if there



Maurice Benayoun: *World Skin, A Photo-Safari in the Land of War* (commissioned by Ars Electronica 97)

were only a degree of “seriousness” distinguishing Nintendo and real warfare ... as if there were only a difference of interactivity separating art and death?

War, let us never forget, is both absolute horror and untruth in all its manifestations, the combination of totalitarian power, and injustice with no recourse. It has nothing to do with the game, or art.

In the depths of the whale’s belly, armed with a mouse, a camera or a data helmet, we strive to “tear the skin off the world”. But we are still enveloped by tons of ideological blubber, while miles of technological ocean separate us from the fresh air. In other words, the art of immersion plays the game of general hypocrisy, if it instills in our unconscious that we can resist war by producing art.

### The Cockroach

In 1999, (i.e. two years before the “events of 11 September”), Jaron Lanier, the well-known pioneer of virtual reality, proposed a response to potential future global conflicts or attacks targeted at prominent places of world civilisation. His concept was a particularly original concept in response to a competition organised by the *New York Times Magazine* to create a “a time capsule that will survive one thousand years in Manhattan.”<sup>5</sup> His idea was to encode all the archives of the *New York Times* in the DNA of cockroaches which would then be released in selected locations in Manhattan.<sup>6</sup> The familiar New York cockroach has survived everything—earthquakes, famines, floods... It would even survive a nuclear attack. Moreover, its genes are extremely stable. And associated with these genes are DNA sequences known as “introns” which serve no known purpose. Lanier’s proposal was therefore to use genetic recombination techniques to “overwrite” these intron sequences—which, as we know, are composed of four base pairs of amino acids. A computer memory is comprised of two states (0 or 1). DNA memory comprises four states, denominated A,T,C and G. A DNA sequence can therefore store twice as much information as the same digital sequence. This means that “digital” archives can therefore be directly transcribed into their “genetic” equivalent; the corresponding DNA sequences can then be synthesised and finally “ligated” into the intron DNA via injection into cockroach eggs. It is then simply a matter of letting these archival roaches multiply for some time and then releasing them in selected locations in Manhattan. Jaron Lanier predicts that after a few years, the archival roaches with a recombined memory will have become “endemic” and the archives they transport “permanent.”

I propose taking Lanier’s idea a step further. Why not transcribe the entire Web into the genome of insects and rodents of the planet? As we all know, the Web is a “network of networks”. It would therefore be a matter of creating a kind of dupli-

cation of the Web via a network of cockroaches, flies, rats, scorpions, all highly resistant species, as we know. Each species would be associated to a particular part of the Web. The advantage? Perpetuity and survival. Although this idea of a network of genetically modified cockroaches and flies is not “art” in the strict sense of the word, it would nevertheless mean that we could for example provide shelter for all the artistic gems of Manhattan (for at least a thousand years).

These networks of cockroaches and rats could be the follow-up to the Web in a different form. The Web in its present configuration is evidently doomed to disappear. A number of formidable enemies are already joining ranks to expedite its announced death. And I am not alluding to the allegedly imminent danger from “cyber-terrorists”—this is merely a ruse to push through substantial increases in the budgets of counter-terrorism agencies. It is the overall concept of the Web which is the problem today. The legal murder of Napster is a clear symptom of this rage to annihilate the great libertarian utopia which accompanied the birth of the Web. But the demise of Napster is probably only the prelude to even more radical action. The “public” Internet network will undoubtedly be gradually forced to give way to a “proprietary” network—this is what the market demands: the mere idea of something being free of charge is horrifying to capitalism. It is of little significance whether *Microhard* or *Time Warning* ends up imposing their proprietary standards. What is certain is that war has been declared against free software, open source codes, and free swapping sites. This is demonstrated by the development of a legislative, technical and political arsenal: national and international intellectual property provisions are becoming increasingly stringent as far as protection is concerned, and the states are mobilising their entire might to combat “piracy” and “cyberterrorists.”

According to Jaron Lanier, “Manhattan is one of the least desirable locations on Earth for archival storage. It is a likely target for terrorist or military attack during the specified period of time [1,000 years].” And indeed, we did not have to wait that long for the terrorist attacks. The next stage of terrorism is foreseeable. In a so-called “knowledge-based” global civilisation, future terrorist attacks will not merely strike office blocks—even if they epitomise the very heart of the financial system or kill as many people as possible. The terrorists will have to go a step further. Future attacks will strike against art, memory or religion.

The terrorists or warriors of tomorrow will not only wish to kill bodies, they will strike at the very soul of their enemies. The canon fire which destroyed the Buddhas of Bamiyan is the writing on the wall, the foreshadow of a heinous war, declared against the spirit of the peoples.

As UNESCO recalls, the deliberate destruction of the cultural legacy in times of war is in fact nothing out of the ordinary. However the most recent events, which caught us unawares, as it were, such as the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban, or the demolition of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh by Hindu fanatics,<sup>7</sup> are quintessentially different. The plan of certain groups to demolish the Omar mosque to erect the “third Temple” of Salomon in Jerusalem<sup>8</sup>—a virtual model of which can already be visited<sup>9</sup>—goes in the same direction. The groups who support this kind of project are well aware of what they are doing. They have no qualms about brandishing a “third world war” as the probable consequence of such a construction. But it is not really this perspective that matters to them. What they really want is to deny the Others what is different and to annihilate their spirit. The commanding generals of future wars will have a new strategy at their disposal: the

annihilation of the Others, not only physically or culturally, but also spiritually. But let us return to our cockroaches. As Jaron Lanier emphasises, his proposal is “not intended as a joke or social commentary.” It is the “best technological solution.”

This is over-modest on his part. The solution of encoding the memory of peoples into the DNA of cockroaches is brilliant, not only from the technological, but also from the philosophical point of view. It clearly illustrates the means to which we will have to resort—to store the works of the spirit in the catacombs of the Empire. Instead of hovering freely above the waters, the spirit will be reduced to being incarnated in cockroaches. What a splendid finale to an era!

Faced with this perspective, the artist is confronted with a raft of serious questions. What am I to do? Should I produce DNA-compatible files to facilitate the work of the archivists?

The multi-billionaires who can afford to buy the works of Paul Cézanne already have to resort to locking up their works of art in armoured safes in the vaults of banks for evident reasons of safety. The fragile and coveted traces of the artist's view of Saint-Victoire mountain are now doomed to an existence with no glimpse of daylight. But the vaults of the banks will no longer be sufficiently resistant in this new dawning millennium. The press has featured continued reports of numerous works of art which went down in the rubble of the World Trade Center. We will have to go much further if we wish to safeguard the memory of art and the memory of the spirit for the future, and to give future archaeologists a chance to glimpse the traces of their past.

At the beginning of the second world war, George Orwell said: “The first test of any work of art is survival.”<sup>10</sup> Yesterday the Nazis stole and appropriated the works of the great masters—which was at least a homage of vice to virtue. Tomorrow we have to fear that the new barbarians will develop a strategy of total destruction of works of the spirit. They will no longer wish to appropriate the artistic riches of the vanquished foe, but to annihilate the memory of the Others.

We have therefore got to realise that if a work of art is to survive, it must be stored in our cockroach introns. In a thousand years from now, we may only have VRML sequences, carefully concealed in a few DNA introns, with which to visit the virtual Temple Mount, Haram Al Sharif, the mosque of Omar, the Wailing Wall or the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

But all this is merely a last resort, a purely archival solution. The cockroach is not art—or religion—in itself, it merely stores a pale and necessarily simplistic copy of art. Might there be another solution?

Surely there are other ways of saving the spirit and rendering art really indestructible, inextinguishable, invincible ...

### The Rabbit

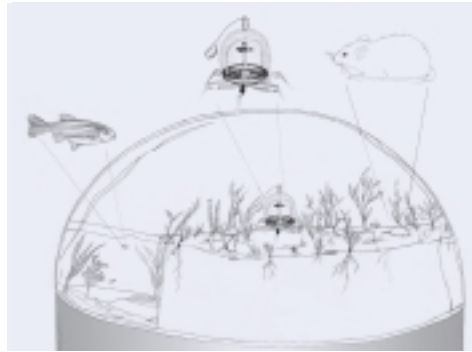
There has been a lot of talk about the transgenic artist Eduardo Kac<sup>11</sup> and his *GFP Bunny*, a genetically modified green fluorescent rabbit. Kac, famous for his projects on telematics, has taken a new direction with *The Eighth Day*,<sup>12</sup> a transgenic project comprising bio-luminescent creatures such as plants, amoeba, fish and mice in an artificial ecosystem, which is physically closed but open on the Web. In his *Genesis* installation, Kac encourages the participants to provoke genetic mutations, proposing “a perfidious and destabilising game on the Internet.”<sup>13</sup>

Kac introduces a neologism: the “biobot.”

Philippe Quéau



Eduardo Kac: *GFP Bunny*



Eduardo Kac: *The Eighth Day*

"A biobot is a robot with an active biological element within its body which is responsible for aspects of its behavior (...) When amoebas divide, the biobot exhibits dynamic behavior inside the enclosed environment (...) The biobot also functions as the avatar of Web participants inside the environment. Independent of the ascent and descent of the biobot, Web participants are able to control its audiovisual system with a pan-tilt actuator. The autonomous ascent and descent motion provide Web participants with a new perspective of the environment."

This is no less than a modern-day manifestation of Wagner's dream of "total art" or *Gesamtkunstwerk*! The great artistic fusion is once again within our reach. Amoebas and the brain, the biobot and the Web, the "participants" and "the environment" are to merge under the aegis of the good old Doctor Kac.

Can Kac be suspected of mere ideological allegiance to the biogenetic industry? No, this artist cannot simply be written off as an *agent provocateur*, determined to make a name for himself by making bunnies and amoebas shine in the dark and thus surreptitiously reassuring people that after all if transgenic art can paint bunnies green, one need have no qualms about serving up transgenic rabbit stew for dinner.

No, we cannot suspect Kac of being "passive" with his rabbits as Miller was passive in the belly of his whale. Kac is "active"—and how!—in his trans-Faustian will to add an "eighth day" to the biblical week.

But enough of this irony. I do not approve of Kac's art. It seems fascistic and frivolous to me. It is dangerously frivolous because it creates further confusion. It mixes up everything, amoebas and the Internet, the Web and the Bible. Far from "enlightening the conscience," it leads to further obscurity. And it is fascistic in that it incites us to passive approval ("Oh, what a lovely shade of green!") of the big "game" (again this metaphor of the "game"! ) of genetic engineering, by becoming its silent accomplices. It even incites us to become its active agents, big style, by personally participating in the great genetic mutational spiel. No, Kac does not enlighten the conscience—he is nothing but a collaborator. But what we need is a resistance movement. To illustrate my point of view, and as a kind of proof by means of the absurd, I propose to take the *GFP Bunny* idea a step further:

GFP stands for *Green Fluorescent Protein*. It does not take a genius to predict that sooner or later RFP and BFP, i.e. red and blue fluorescent proteins, will also arrive

on the scene. So why not pull a rabbit out of our hat whose every third hair is fluorescent red, green or blue, according to the familiar principle of colour television (I'll leave the technical details to the engineers from the biogenetic industry). The result: the *Photo Bunny*. We could therefore store furry photos of all the masterpieces of our museums in a rabbit hutch. The next stage is easy to predict. By combining the genes of the chameleon, the cricket and the glow-worm with the genes of our photo bunny, it would be as easy as pie to create the *Television Bunny*. The fluorescent images could change, à la chameleon, but at a frequency which is slightly higher than the shrillness of the cricket, and with a degree of luminosity several times higher (per hair) than that of the glow-worm. We would then soon be able to watch big movies like *Metropolis* or *Gone with the Wind* on the bunny screens.

But these adaptations, you will realise, are merely modest improvements of the original idea.

Let us take this idea even further.

The next step would be to create a total work of art out of humanity. Why not inject the genes of the television bunny into the human genome? People would no longer have red, blond or brown locks but high-definition hair to which we could attach our holiday snaps, interposed with advertisements.

### Art, Good and Evil

Art certainly has a role to play in the solution of global conflict. However, if there is to be an artistic response to global conflict, art must be of global scope in a global culture. This is as utopian an idea as that of a global democracy or a universal civilisation. Evidently only the "market" has so far succeeded in becoming truly global.

It will escape no one that economic and technical globalisation by far surpasses the forces of art. Art seems to have been a part-accomplice, and has simply let itself be absorbed by the market. And even if art had the strength to break free, it would have to have something to say about "values." But is it up to art to talk of "good" and "evil"? Good sentiments don't make for good novels, as they say. Universal civilisation does not exist (yet). Conversely, the absolute contrary to civilisation certainly exists already. Genocides (Cambodia, Yugoslavia, Rwanda) shed a dark light on the depths of all the souls on the planet. Is absolute evil perhaps the only universal non-value? What can transgenic art tell us about genocide?

The artists prepared to confront this challenge are few and far between.

More generally, what can art tell us about evil? For example, has art anything to tell us about the "axis of evil"? It would seem not. Our age, so prompt to advocate freedom of expression, remains strangely silent on such matters.

However, the 20th century did after all bring forth a number of artists or writers capable of voicing a strong opinion on these issues.

The most radical attacks on "the West" do not come from Ben Laden. They are initiated by Europe itself. Remember the tirades of a certain Bakunin who wished to "spread Satan." As far as he is concerned, there is no evil apart from the gospel of the Lord and original sin. This type of supposition is diametrically opposed to that of the Pilgrim Fathers, who sailed to America as a self-proclaimed "people of saints". They saw themselves as "God's chosen few," destined to guide the world, and in the purest of Puritan traditions found natural sanctification for their global imperialism in by the Book of Daniel, chapter 7:14. Cromwell and his "Parliament of Saints" also claimed to be "God's chosen ones." The "chosen ones," like the



new Leviathan<sup>15</sup> necessary to establish God's order on earth, are the exact antithesis of the "fallen ones." "The axis of evil" has ancient roots.

This shows that demonising the adversary is nothing new; Al Qaeda is not a pioneer in this field, and that Satanism is inextricably linked to the west<sup>16</sup>.

What then can art do in the dichotomy between "good" and "evil"?

In a publication<sup>17</sup> which appeared about a decade ago, I defended the thesis of art as an "intermediary", a *metaxu* in Plato's sense of the word. For Plato, the intermediaries are love (between beauty and ugliness), philosophy (between knowledge and ignorance) and the soul (between death and immortality).

Today, in the specific context of our planet which is shrinking and becoming hotter and hotter, I believe that the role of art is to strive to be an "intermediary" between "good" and "evil."

This would be its best contribution to the pacific solution of global conflict both today and in the future.

Translated from the French by Stephen Conn

- 1 I would like to thank Jens Hauser for the information on his plans for an exhibition on art and genetics entitled "Ces artistes qui jouent Dieu, grandeur nature" ("These artists who play at being God—life-size"), in which he raises the fundamental question: "Are genetic artists arousing our conscience or are they merely the lackeys of the biotech-industry?"
- 2 George Orwell, "A Collection of Essays." A Harvest Book. 1981, p. 210–252
- 3 [www.modcult.brown.edu/people/scholes/wwwwhale/para\\_36\\_776.html](http://www.modcult.brown.edu/people/scholes/wwwwhale/para_36_776.html)
- 4 "There is nothing left but quietism—robbing reality of its terrors by simply submitting to it. Get inside the whale—or rather, admit you are inside the whale. Give yourself over to the world process, stop fighting against it or pretending that you control it; simply accept it, endure it, record it." In: op. cit.
- 5 Cf.: [www.nymuseums.com/lm01052t.htm#1](http://www.nymuseums.com/lm01052t.htm#1)
- 6 <http://people.advanced.org/~jaron/roach.html>
- 7 This Hindu extremism was dramatically evident in the demolition of the Ayodhya mosque in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh in 1992. The 16th-century Babri mosque was said to have been built on the exact site of an ancient temple dedicated to the god of war, Rama. In the years 1984–1989 an anti-Muslim campaign sparked a series of riots, culminating in massacres. The demolition of the mosque on 6th December 1992 by Hindu extremists prompted a bout of religious rioting between Hindus and Muslims, leaving 2,000 people dead. This bloodshed in turn sparked a wave of revenge by the predominantly Muslim population in neighbouring Bangladesh. Seven years later, the problem triggered by the demolition of the Babri mosque has still not been solved. Extremists in fact have plans to build a Hindu temple on the same site, a project which even featured in the 1998 BJP electoral manifesto.
- 8 [www.templemountfaithful.org/](http://www.templemountfaithful.org/) and [www.thehope.org/vt-temple.htm](http://www.thehope.org/vt-temple.htm)
- 9 [www.thehope.org/vt-build.htm#vt](http://www.thehope.org/vt-build.htm#vt), [www.jct.ac.il/judaica/3temple/index.html](http://www.jct.ac.il/judaica/3temple/index.html) and [www.thehope.org/tmppat1.htm#2.1](http://www.thehope.org/tmppat1.htm#2.1)
- 10 See op.cit.
- 11 [www.ekac.org/](http://www.ekac.org/)
- 12 [www.ekac.org/8thday.html](http://www.ekac.org/8thday.html)
- 13 See Jens Hauser, op. cit.
- 14 "And the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him." (Daniel 7:27)
- 15 Hobbes' *Leviathan* was published during Cromwell's interregnum.
- 16 *Race de Caïn, au ciel monte Et sur la terre jette Dieu*, from Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*
- 17 Philippe Quéau, *METAXU, Théorie de l'art intermédiaire*, Editions Champ Vallon, 1989