Forum and Reviews

Cultural and Creative Industries

Edited by Elena Vai

Manuel Cirauqui and S+T+ARTS Project

An Interview by Kilowatt and Sineglossa

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Abstract

A complex system has three main characteristics. It consists of a number of heterogeneous entities that make choices that evolve and change over time, the entities interact with one another and these interactions lead to the last characteristic: the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts.

The search for complexity as a possible solution to contemporary problems, first of all climate change, is the trigger that favoured the encounter between Kilowatt, Sineglossa and S+T+ARTS, which led, as a first collaboration, to Bologna (Italy) edition of NEAR + FUTURES + QUASI + WORLDS. This travelling exhibition, curated by Manuel Cirauqui, intends to underline the role that collaboration and cross-fertilization between scientific, technological and artistic sectors can play in promoting contemporary research and innovation.

In the article an interview with the curator.

Keywords

Ecosystem
Art&Science
S+T+ARTS
New European Bauhaus

A complex system has three main characteristics. It consists of a number of heterogeneous entities that make choices that evolve and change over time, the entities interact with one another and these interactions lead to the last characteristic: the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts.

The key issue? You can't properly understand the whole system by simply looking at its single parts.

Merging the parts into a whole, the integration of competences at the intersections between science, technology and arts, underpin the desire to overcome a linear and reductionist vision of the world where a potentially infinite economic growth is the mere objective of the economic model. Kilowatt and Sineglossa want to create an ecosystem that boosts the activation of communities connecting nature and culture, bringing together art and innovation to address contemporary challenges with imagination, multidisciplinary expertise and a cooperative approach.

The collaboration between Kilowatt, Sineglossa and S+T+ARTS — the initiative of the European Commission that implements a European approach to technological innovation centered on human needs and values — aims to apply and develop the S+T+ARTS methodology to environmental and social contemporary challenges, a new model in which cultural production is widespread, horizontal and participatory.

The focus is to investigate complexity in its most positive interpretation, the one that offers new development opportunities and new future imaginaries, embracing a systemic perspective that balances positions, as in a system, replacing hierarchies with relationships, keeping value of the strength that those interactions can generate. Exploring complexity means creating a hybrid, unsegmented and stimulating environment, a network of connections capable of originating systemic visions and responding to major contemporary issues, first of all environmental ones.

Technology, science and art are deeply linked with culture, identity and social values. This is why it will be presented *NEAR + FUTURES + QUASI + WORLDS*, a travelling exhibition that aims to emphasize the role that collaboration in scientific, technological

and artistic sectors can play in promoting contemporary research and innovation. Initially staged at STATE Studio Berlin in July 2020, the exhibition will be presented for the first time in Italy in Bologna, and more precisely at Auditorium Biagi, in the central Sala Borsa, in May 2022, in partnership with Fondazione Innovazione Urbana and CRICC — Centro di Ricerca per l'interazione con le Industrie Culturali e Creative.

Through the notion of statuary, as a crucial concept in Western art history and beyond, *NEAR + FUTURES + QUASI + WORLDS* confronts classicism as it reappears, mutates, decomposes, and re-emerges in research-based art and collaborations with advanced technology today. Since Antiquity, in fact, statues have emblemized body qualities and highlight the dialectics between artifacts and living beings, representation, and flesh. In the exhibit So Kanno's *Senseless Drawing Bot*, Egor Kraft's *Content Aware Studies*, Iris van Herpen's *Magnetic Motion* couture collection and Julia Koerner's *Digital Vogue* research are works that invite us to think at the intersection of historical time and multi-faceted, post-human thingness. They project new encodings of social memory, monumentality, corporeality, agency, and myth.

Unexpected tensions between time, timelessness, technology, and bare construction also appear in radically abstract kinetic devices such as Ralf Baecker's *Putting the Pieces Back Together Again*, Evelina Domnich and Dmitry Gelfand's *Hilbert Hotel*, Refik Anadol's *Melting Memories*, and Félicie d'Estienne d'Orves's *Martian Sun Series*. Also, at work in the worlds in progress is the merging of micro and macro scales. Like probes of exploded geographies, they inevitably make us think of enigmatic snow globes. In *By the Code of Soil: (de)Compositions*, by Kasia Molga & Scanner, and *I'm Humanity* by Etsuko Yakushimaru, the living appears as a generative element in the artwork that permeates the world beyond. Not coincidentally, sound is a key aspect of both these projects — as a haunting manifestation of life's substrate as well as a translation of the world into genetic code. Meanwhile, sound fragments emerge in Forensic Architecture's *The Murder of Pavlos Fyssas* to reveal the disturbing evidence of

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 1
Kasia Molga & Scanner,
(de)Compositions, still
from film by Ivan Marev-
ich. Image courtesy of
Kasia Molga & Scanner.

Fig. 2
Félicie d'Estienne
d'Orves, *Martian Sun
Series*, produced by Le
Fresnoy - Studio national
des arts contemporains
(Tourcoing, France).
© Félicie d'Estienne
d'Orves.

Fig. 3
Evelina Domnitch and
Dmitry Gelfand, *Hilbert
Hotel*, hollow glass
microspheres float along
startlingly square-shaped
orbits, tracing the quad-
rupolar electric fields that
keep them airborne.
© Evelina Domnitch and
Dmitry Gelfand.

Fig. 4

Fig. 4
Refik Anadol, *Melting Memories*. Image courtesy of Refik Anadol

Fig. 5

Fig. 5
Egor Kraft, *Content Aware Studies* series.
© Egor Kraft. Image courtesy of Alexander Levy, Berlin, and Anna Nova Gallery, St. Petersburg.

Fig. 6

Fig. 6
Julia Koerner, *Digital Vogue*, 3D Stola for Ruth Carter Academy Awards.
© Julia Koerner.

a political crime in contemporary Greece, the birthplace of classicism and the political laboratory of European post-rescue culture. Again, issues of monumentality, historicity, data landscape, re-emerge in the world-in-progress of concealed facts.

Many works exhibited are the results of the S+T+ARTS Residencies, Lighthouse Pilots, Re-FREAM and MindSpaces programs, as a platform for co-creation, debate, and cross-pollination.

Cross-pollination is exactly what enhances the creation of new cultural identities, the exchange of knowledge, ideas and needs to develop true interdisciplinary projects. Manuel Cirauqui, curator of the exhibit *NEAR + FUTURES + QUASI + WORLDS* asserts:

Cognitive and material production suffer from the effects of monoculture and compartmentalization, which lead to exhaustion and sterilization. You can experience the deadly effects of this administrative ideology pretty much everywhere you look at. Universities, research labs, and tech companies are key spaces for this kind of observation but also for our advancement toward better and more inspiring dynamics. Therefore, I would rather speak of cross-pollination than cross-fertilization. Cross-pollination implies a complex plurality of forces moving within each other's field, it is spatial and aerial and thus it conveys a poetic sense of operational complexity. There is a sense of joy in the fact that pollination agents in nature are not necessarily or not fully aware that they are pollinating, or the way they pollinate or what they pollinate with—we may say they move and they perform holistically. We may never consider an ecosystem as structurally closed, and the efforts of such initiatives as S+T+ARTS not only manifest an awareness but also a proactive attention to dynamize research ecosystems by fostering new collaborations and experimental dialogues. I see the founding principles of S+T+ARTS as a musical score that is there to be interpreted and performed freely by as many collaborators as possible, for the sake of innovation and the fruitful disruption of creative economies in the European and human framework. But we are starting to know how much the survival of those

frameworks will depend on transcending the geographical, national, and cultural borders, as well as the self-centered idea of the human species.

Artistic interventions are particularly effective in the mediation from science to society and they place the public on the edge of reality, pointing at the exploration of possible multiverse. Our intention is not only to make complexity acceptable, but also to make it the framework that enables us to read and understand our present throughout creative and artistic experiences. We are convinced that, now more than ever, interrogating contemporary challenges using art is crucial to imagine new perspectives for more sustainable futures.

Art, science and technology can play a fundamental role in dealing with the unknown and they help to imagine possible futures with a divergent way of thinking that can be translated into systemic change. Contemporary issues have to be addressed not as a private matter but as a collective one, taking into consideration that it deals with ecosystems, territories, organizations, and relationships among living beings.

NEAR + FUTURES + QUASI + WORLDS has a promise inside, something that is going to happen and also a plural sense, stating that the actual world we live in is not the only possible reality, so we asked Manuel Cirauqui (MC) to tell us more precisely what the exhibit name expresses:

(MC) Not only the world we live in is the only possible reality, as you say, but any reality is constantly demonstrated as plural and incomplete.

The title of the exhibition merges a number of critical ideas about the incompleteness, the open-endedness, and manifold becoming of research, amplified when the latter is understood from the perspective of transversal co-creation.

There are key underlying notions, such as the idea of project as the conceptual vessel for every artistic and scientific advancement; and, likewise, that of research itself as a diversity of critical actions oriented toward potential encounters, discoveries, and realizations.

The "near future" references what is always about to happen, the "almost-there"

we live in when we engage in creative and innovative processes. In this sense, it is a form of life, and both its stage and biotope is something not fully formed, a “quasi-world”. Let me say that I find an element of self-sufficiency and conformism in the commercial idea of “worlding”, as it is used in the creation of video games, VR environments, and the like.

It cancels out not only the perfectibility but also the potentially infinite mutations and hybridizations of every “world” as a collective formation.

It is more exciting and honest, I think, to speak of “quasi-worlds” always in plural, as it is to speak about futures and not the future. Our ongoing investigations serve in fact to prevent these instances from being definitely unified; we must keep reopening them up.

Lastly, there is a graphic ingredient in the exhibition title, the “+” sign that has been a part of the S+T+ARTS identity from its inception. It is a visual rather than a verbal mark — not an “and” or a “plus” you need to read out loud, but rather an indicator of growth, accumulative energy, and volume. It also signals the open-endedness of adding and adding new material, new iterations, which is very much a principle of the exhibition as it tours and rethinks itself in different venues. That is also the underlying concept of the NFQW typeface we produced specifically for the show.

In the Anthropocene a great number of changes occurred that do not concern only natural landscapes and cities. Everything is changing: the economy, how to think and create culture, the sense of nature and the place that humankind has in it.

Time, circularity and care are interconnected concepts that develop the idea of rhythm that underlies every natural ecosystem: the crises we are facing are systemic in nature so, to overcome those crises, we need to understand how complex systems work and to arrive at such an understanding we need to think systemically.

It's possible to engage with science and technology issues from just a more than an exclusively human perspective, building a holistic approach that supports other life forms and the health of ecosystems.

Technology is a means to an end and it can play a positive role only if it affects in a good way the environment and the people living it. This is also the framework that inspired Ursula Von Der Leyen in launching the New European Bauhaus Movement, that encourages European stakeholders to change their paradigm in order to deliver a beautiful, sustainable and inclusive New Green Deal. It should be a matter of rethinking innovation processes, business models and identities involving empathy, research and experimentation, a visionary capacity and structural insight. It's a matter of empowerment since it allows the community of practitioners to bring different points of view to the table, create new cultural practices that can embrace the contextual complexity of our times and foster imagination by bestowing capabilities to act on systemic change.

As a matter of fact, one of the biggest challenges we are facing is to imagine the possible post-anthropocenic scenarios and especially new forms of relationship and equilibrium between human beings and the environment. Manuel told us what does the exhibit say in this respect:

(MC) Humans have been living for too long on an idea of defensive-extractive survival, and we have come to realize that precisely in order to survive we must eliminate our hegemonic view on all other life forms on Earth, and start learning from their smarter and more generous ways of co-dependence, what we may call the decentralized, collective, diverse regulation systems embodied in interspecific societies.

In this sense, *NEAR + FUTURES + QUASI + WORLDS* presents a multiplicity of examples of collaboration and inspiration beyond the human paradigm: be it through organizational models that challenge the classical idea of form in multiple ways; through the post-human performativity of many of the works; or the direct involvement with other intelligent species in various cases. I am not talking about sections or typologies of works in the show, and therefore I would rather not put names after each of these ideas as most contributions in the exhibition would fit several categories simultaneously. As for your reference to the Anthropocene, one may say it provides the mood for the entire

show, there is a pervasive mix of optimism and melancholia as we witness the creative efforts of all artists included in it. On the one hand, we look at the vitality of ancient aesthetic paradigms in the way performing bodies and landscapes appear in the practices of contemporary artists thinking and making together with the most advanced scientists and technologists. But we also want to look at the realizations of contemporary research as a possible antiquity for those who may find traces and memories of us in the next three, four thousand years. Which, from the perspective of geological time, are of course pretty near futures.

Kilowatt, in collaboration with its network of stakeholders, aims to create a hybrid ecosystem of international scale in partnership with Sineglossa: an artistic-cultural production center which aims to enhance a community of practices such as art, research, businesses, ETS and citizenship, activating a permanent laboratory where the artistic investigation helps to understand the complexity and to build positive imaginaries that guide change actions. A synergic, inclusive and participatory approach to sustainability and culture, a space capable of creating unexpected paths thanks to a mix of services aimed at different publics, a model based on innovation and alternative languages to generate connections, collaborations and projects that live right on the edge of different fields and subjects.

The partners' teams want to make artistic quality germinate and expand cultural production by enhancing the role of the artists by activating a common discourse with research centers, companies and the third sector to imagine desirable and sustainable futures and generate opportunities for innovation, starting from the needs of different realities.

The overall objective of this project is to interact, grow, transform and continue to explore the connections of complexity by experimenting with art, technology and creativity to become drivers of innovation to develop new shared futures.

Manuel Cirauqui
Curator at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, writer and founding director of Eina Idea, a think tank associated to EINA University School of Design and Universidad Autònoma in Barcelona, curator of the Starts Expo.

Federico Bomba
He directed shows around the world from 2006 till 2014, then founded Sineglossa, a cultural research and production center. He is the artistic director of art+b=love(?) and the scientific director of the book series Nonturismo. He is an advisor for international art&tech initiatives and a contributor for several contemporary art and cultural economy's magazines.

Nicoletta Tranquillo
She has a Msc in sustainable development and environmental science at the Lund University (Sweden) and previously a degree in Business Economics at the Bocconi University (Italy). In 2013 she also attended the summer school "Entrepreneurship and Innovation in the Age of Change" of the LSE. She is co-founder of Kilowatt, where she works to support the development and the empowerment of sustainable and impact oriented businesses, in the field of food, climate change, circular economy, agriculture and social innovation.

Silvia Girardello
With a Bachelor in Arts and Humanities and a Msc in Marketing and Communication, Silvia Girardello works in Kilowatt as a copywriter. Passionate about the arts, she has also been working in the implementation of artistic projects for the last few years. She developed her competencies through a previous collaboration with an art gallery, where she held the position of communication manager.