Performing embodiment: *when Life and Art meet*

A Thesis

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Abstract

This work assesses and then expands on the notion of “embodiment” and its implication when working within robotic art, artificial life artworks, interactive and kinetic installations and performance. The result is a hybrid artistic practice where the viewer occupies a central role.

More specifically, this paper explores on the notion of “Artificial Corporeality” as an artistic attempt to question the arguments for disembodiment throughout the cybernetic tradition. But also, this work explores and promotes a bodily and corporeal “inter-species” encounter, an attempt to avoid practical, rational, utilitarian, and calculated ways of interactivity. Yet, this paper presents a series of writings, statements, and descriptions of a series of works developed during the past two years while developing the MFA at The Ohio State University. A body of work that was born as a political proclamation for the encounter not just between a viewer and an artwork, but the encounter between the contemporary human being and “significant others.”
a mi mamá y papá
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Vita

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Fields of Study

Major Field: Art
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An Introduction

I come to the Art&Technology program at The Ohio State University as a natural path after some years of working in a diffuse area in-between art, social sciences, robotics and gender studies. Always interested in technology and its theoretical and aesthetical implications, once I learned about the MFA at The Ohio State University and the mix of backgrounds, I felt it was the place and the moment to go back to school.

Using the human and nonhuman body as a point of departure, my work and research deals with cultural studies of technoscience, particularly in regard to how its discursive effects and affects are inscribed in human subjectivity and how they can be reflected through art. For that reason, the technological issue turned into a “meta-discourse,” so to speak, in my artmaking process: it serves not only as a tool or material to work with, but it is in itself the subject matter I choose to address. This aesthetic and political commitment led me to make non-technological observations on technologies, that is, I focused not on the technical object itself but considered it as part of culture, participating in social processes that exceed their technical limits and capabilities. I believe that is one of the main reasons why I do not always use the same technique or unique tool and material in my studio practice. Instead a “concept/idea/emotion/intuition” determines the material, the shapes and the tools I decide to use. The outcome is a hybrid artistic practice, a work that was born once the categories are “broken”: a work that has something of robotics, performance, sculpture, and installation.

In this thesis paper I put together a set of writings, statements, ideas, concepts and descriptions about the work I developed during my time at OSU –i.e.: my time at Columbus-Ohio and the United States. However, following my own way of making work, you will find here a paper that it is neither a descriptive text, nor an argumentative one. Neither an expository text, nor a narrative text type. You will find here, a thesis that is written from my body (following H. Cixous instructions), that is, the body of a woman, Latina and non-native English speaker. The result, perhaps, it can’t be other than a “minor literature”. And so, hopefully, it can also comprise: “a high coefficient of deterritorialization, a political nature, and a collective value”.

Part One. Some thoughts that outline the aesthetics of creating “Artificial Corporealities”

I attempt to create a ‘new embodiment’ (artificial) that does not accept definitions: “the uncanny” in-between. I attempt to make art that does not provide answers; rather, I am interested in providing questions. I attempt not to put closure on anything. I rather prefer ambiguity (irony?).

Embodiment is a body (human or any other kind) in context, enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture. As Carrie Noland said, “[embodiment], is the process whereby collective behaviors and beliefs, acquired through acculturation, are rendered individual and ‘lived’ at the level of the body. Agency, it follows, is the power to alter those acquired behaviors and beliefs for purposes that may be reactive (resistant) or collaborative (innovative) in kind (...)” (Noland 2009, 9)

From Plato to Descartes, the tradition has thought of the body as getting in the way of intelligence and reason, rather than being in any way indispensable for it. My work is, from the beginning, an effort to go in the opposite direction: which is to say, my artwork is from the very start an attempt to embody some kind of “intelligence” where form and matter cannot be separated, and also, an attempt to embody some sort of encounter between different kinds of bodies.

Thus, my robotic works, my installations, my performances are an attempt to dismiss the arguments for disembodiment throughout the cybernetic tradition - the idea of human beings as a set of informational processes. Then, I believe my work is primarily about embodiment and that is the main reason why I do not call it “sculpture”, not simply “robotic art”, not merely “performance” but “the aesthetic of creating Artificial Corporealities” or “the aesthetic of creating bodily inter-species encounters” (i.e. corporeal dialogues, interactions). Any formal and conceptual - conscious or unconscious - decision I make with my art comes from this main interest.

For that reason, before making any work I usually ask myself: Who is “the subject”? What is “Life”, and who is “Alive”? Who posses agency? Is the agency necessarily natural? Is embodiment just human? Which kind of
body could be embodied? What are the role machines and animals (or any other “significant otherness”) play in the self-definition of human beings?

Fortunately, I still don’t have the answers (perhaps that is the reason why I am still making art); however, I do agree with the way some thinkers attempt to answer those questions. This section, indeed, is an effort to put together some anti-Cartesian thoughts that outline the background that most of the time shapes my work.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, matter is a vast continuum, a field of virtual forces, intensities, thresholds and powers that, under particular conditions, is actualized in the things and bodies we know. Things and bodies are not beings but becomings. So, when thinking about the subject being, I agree with the Deleuzian idea that a being cannot be bound to any category, to any fixed disposition of its immanent distribution. Beings are never classed or distributed according to equivocal analogies (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

And so, as for Deleuze and Guattari, I like to think that we inhabit a “Life” that is not so much concerned with the physical as with what occurs between bodies. I see my art living a life that is not fixed in the “states of things” but a life that is moving between “events”- becomings in time. Thus, I like to think in those possible “events” that can occur when one of my artworks meets a viewer, the “affects” that can emerge from that encounter. From Deleuze and Guattari’s perspective: “We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 157).

If life occurs between bodies, which are those bodies I care about in my art? For sure, I am not concerned only with the white, male, heterosexual, rational body. I definitely imagine the “incorporeality” (or the inter/intra-corporeality) between different kinds of bodies. As Alphonso Lingis said: “What is fascinated (…) is the multiplicity in us -the human form and the nonhuman, vertebrate and invertebrate, animal and vegetable, conscious and unconscious movements and intensities in us that are not yoked to some
conscious goal or purpose that is or can be justified in some capitalist program for economic growth or some transcendental or theological fantasy of object-constitution or creativity seated in us” (Lingis 2003, 166).

Hence, I like to think about “interspecies relations” because, as Donna Haraway pointed out: “we became an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates. To be one is always to become with many” (Haraway 2008, 4). And, following Haraway’s concept of “Figures”, I see my art creatures and machines: “not as representations or didactic illustrations, but rather material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings coshape one another. For me, Figures have always been where the biological and literary or artistic come together with all of the force of lived reality. My body itself is just such a figure, literally” (Haraway 2008, 4).

If Donna Haraway proclaims the “in-encounter” between human beings and domestic animals, I am proclaiming the encounter not just between a man and an artwork, but the encounter between the contemporary human being and a machine – or better said, the encounter with other artificial creatures. Thus, I like to see them, from Haraway’s point of view, as “ordinary beings-in-encounter”: this time not in the lab, the house, the zoo, a factory, an office, but in the space of the museum or the art gallery. As Haraway said, “(…) species of all kinds, living or not, are consequent on a subject-and-object-shaping dance of encounters” (Haraway 2008, 5). That is precisely one of the reasons why I work within the field of “Interactive Art”: I believe that the essence of Interactive Art is to create the possibility for that encounter. When creating a sculpture, when designing behaviors or personalities, when modeling an artificial body or when performing with a machine, I am defining some potential actions and reactions between the human viewer and that artificial artwork; I’m creating an open space for a possible “dialogue/interaction” between them.

Therefore, in order to promote a “corporeal inter-species encounter”, in order to evade an interaction that precedes the cybernetic tradition, and also, in order to avoid the practical, rational and utilitarian bodily “calculations” of the human/viewers, when creating an artwork, I attempt to use at least one of these three artistic/ideological strategies: a non-linguistic embodied communication; a non-anthropomorphic sensibility and a non-teleological, non-purposive spirit.
I- A non-linguistic embodied communication:
The dynamics of trans-species interaction is expressed without words, with non-verbal language. In my art, some expressions are not a response controlled by words, but a spontaneous eruption of the body. According to Alphonso Lingis, it is the capacity of ordering the words one after the other which eliminates ambiguity, and with that, humans become a subject of discourse capable of coding and ordering their bodies. “The citizens do not lean against, rub against, fondle, smell, palpate one another’s bodies, feeling the streams and cascades and backwaters within; they look upon the blank wall of the faces, the pure surfaces extended over their heads. They read there the linear traits of meaning” (Lingis 2003, 178).
My intention is to welcome ambiguity and for that I need to eradicate our linguistic capacity for communication. I attempt to eliminate verbal signs and the directives and imperatives that they normally impose. By eliminating words, I welcome any corporeal gesture and with them any non-specific meaning they emanate.

II- A non-anthropomorphic sensibility:
The intention is to remove not only a “humanoid” appearance but also to deconstruct the “rational” and “coherent” physiological structure of the human body. According to Katherine Hayles, not only discourse writes the body, but also the body writes discourses (Hayles 1999, 205). So, which kind of discourses can be written from an amorphous body? My art creature’s bodies are shaped with no front/back, up/down distinction. There are no heads, no arms, no legs and no multiple orifices. There is just a general shape that embodies a certain kind of behavior. My intention is to deconstruct the human body in time and space: mobility and verticality, and so be able to ask: which kind of actions this new embodiment demand? How the human body reacts when meeting this “other” embodiment?

III- A non-teleological, non-purposive spirit:
I attempt to represent some bodily behaviors that are below conscious awareness and so elude the teleological fantasy that states that a being -and a machine as his extension- is fundamentally rational, representational, and rule-governed. My art robot’s “behaviors”, and also, my machines are not productive; they extend neither toward a result nor a development. The idea of humans as information processing system in which their actions and knowledge can be explained in terms of rules or principles is contradicted by the aimless movements of my robots, and with the aimless performance of my machines: actions that do
not get their meaning from an outside referent envisioned from the start and do not get their direction from an intended result or goal. Their movements are just movement of another kind. From a humanist point of view, their actions are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberative transformation. As Lingis said, movements with different speeds and intensities: “(movements) that fall, that roll, that collapse, that shift, that settle, that collide with other things, that set other things in motion” (Lingis 2003, 167). And so, I attempt to parody the productive industrial imaginary of a machine, and –from a Camusian perspective— the absurdity implied in our functional/productive interactions.

I believe that these three aspects are connected to each other and are the central bases for what I called the “aesthetic of creating Artificial Corporealities”, a concept I developed when working specifically in Robotic Art. For that reason, this concept will appear more clearly related to Chapter 2, yet is the cause for the creation of the series of work described in Chapter 3. Thus, this new aesthetic, within art&tech and the artistic discourses in between robotics, bioArt, kinetic sculpture, posthumanity, etc. is, for me, an effort to make true the dream I share with Katherine Hayles: “If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival” (Hayles 1999, 5).

What will follow in Chapter 2 and 3 is my personal artistic response to help Katherine Hayles’ dream come true. Indeed, in these chapters, I put together a set of writings, description and/or statements about those artworks I have developed as my personal “micropolitical intervention”. From a Deleuzian point of view, my attempt to achieve a “politics of life”: that is, an effort to achieve a positive deterritorialization, in terms not of emotional excess but of philosophical, artistic, and scientific creation, in terms of “abstract machines” that make possible new lines of thought. And, ultimately, making possible –as for Deleuze and Guattari— a politics of creativity, a theory of revolution that is based neither in the conquest of the old system nor on the implementation of a new system, but on “intermezzos”, the space in between, the unpredictable interstice of process and movement (Bougue 1989, 105).
Part Two. Autonomous and “intelligent” robotic agents

Part 2.a. A Manifesto on “Artificial Corporeality”

“Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humor and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method”, Donna Haraway.

And then I create a body, and then I animate that body.

And then I gave it a personality and then a behavior (or vice versa).

And then I see my own body, my animal human body —its unconscious and conscious behaviors. I try to copy them.

And then I see a machine, I watch science fiction movies, I buy a toy. I try not to copy them.

And then I see how I interact with other people, how our bodies interact. Again, I try to copy them.

I am not god. I am not a scientist. I am just an artist.

(an animistic artist?)

“There is a universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object those qualities with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious”, David Hume.

So, I declare my work an attempt to find an Artificial Corporeality, i.e: AC

AC≠AI, but AC=embodied technology.

Not in science but in art.

Which is to say: In art, AC is complementary to AI.

AC is not just a sculpture, is not just hardware, but both.

AC is form, morphology, materiality and interfaces.

AC determines behaviors. AC determines personalities.

Behaviors and personalities can only be the result of the holistic relation between AC and AI.

1 I will refer to Artificial Corporeality as AC and to Artificial Intelligence as AI -in a world where AL means Artificial Life.
To review:

AC ⇔ AI = robotic art.
AC ⇔ AI = behavioral art forms.
AC ⇔ AI determines the interaction between human-machine/artwork-viewer.

Robotic art: models corporeal interactions.

OK, it might help if I go ahead and honestly declare the ideology behind my thinking, my work and this statement:

Quotation #1: “In so far as I have hands, feet, a body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent on my decisions and which affect my surroundings in a way that I do not choose. These intentions are general…they originate from other than myself, and I am not surprised to find them in all psycho-physical subjects organized as I am”, Merleau-Ponty.

Quotation #2: “Since it turns out that the pattern recognition is a bodily skill basic to all intelligent behavior, the question of whether artificial intelligence is possible boils down to the question of whether there can be an artificial embodied agent”, Hubert Dreyfus.

Quotation #3: “For the first time the word organic ceases to be an unobtainable ideal held out to the artist; following in the wake of cybernetic technology, systems with organic properties will lead to “sculpture” – if it can be called that — rivaling the attributes of intelligent life”, Jack Burnham.

Again, I am not god. I am not a scientist. I am just trying to work within an “aesthetic of behavior”.

It could be said that everybody agrees on the fact that the father of Robotic Art is Sculpture.

Some others believe that the mother is the Automata.

I will enunciate that those robotic works created under an AC conception have the Automata only as a very distant relative. Their mother is – without hesitation- Performance art.

- I would also declare:

Their closest friends are cyborgs, animals and kids (sometimes women too).

They deny cybernetics, artificial intelligence, cognitive science and robotics as their ancestors –now, they are their most formidable enemies.
The AC robots are definitely the disobedient robots. They are inappropriate, they are special.
   They are not functional.
   They have no intentionality
   They are not goal directed
   They have no purpose for action
   They have no motivations
   They are doing nothing

But also:
They don’t have the ability to use “verbal language”.
They know they will fail the Turing test over and over again
(but they don’t care at all; perhaps, because they believe that is the most important reason for their existence?)

So, now remember the last two premises I have enunciated:
- AC⇔AI: determines the interaction between human-machine/artwork-viewer
- Robotic art: models corporeal interactions

These robots do not talk.
They just express themselves through their artificial bodies.
They demand from the human a bodily interaction.
They establish a dialogue between two different kinds of bodies………………………………………………..

As a result,
They establish a non-verbal exchange and this - as any non-verbal way of communication- is not always rational or logical. It is just a group of signs more complex than verbal language and with a wider range of intentional and unintentional meanings. Signs that must be assigned with meanings only by those who participate in the communicative act. Signs that depend on the context in which they are produced.

* This is -for sure- the key that would let ambiguity and irrationality enter my art.
Part 2.b. The case of Anima and Alexitimia

“Since some such originative sources are present in soulless things, and others in things possessed of soul, and in soul, and in the rational part of the soul, clearly some potencies will be non-rational and some will be accompanied by a rational formula. This is why all arts, i.e. all productive forms of knowledge, are potencies; they are originative sources of change in another thing, or in the artist himself considered as other. And each of those which are accompanied by a rational formula is alike capable of contrary effects, but one non-rational power produces one effect; e.g., the hot is capable only of heating, but the medical art can produce both disease and health”, Aristotle, Metaphysics.

They are all “skin”.
Without recognizable organ senses or extremities, without faces or heads.
His skin is pink, rough, and pockmarked. Hers is amber, softer and wet.
He is an almost perfect sphere with only one orifice.
She is just an irregular semi-sphere with multiple imperceptible holes.
He is not asthmatic. She does not suffer of hyperhidrosis.
Their orifices are from another kind.
They are from the same species: “autonomous-robotic-agents”.
One is named Anima, the other I called Alexitimia.
Anima
Breath / Soul / Mind
Animal / Animalis
- - Animism - -
(but also, the feminine inner personality of the male unconscious?)

Alexitimia
- from the Greek -
A = prefix meaning lack
Lexis = word
Thymos = feelings or emotions

Both can perform only one corporeal/kinesthetic behavior that is specifically related to their unique physiology. And both seem to react only to one thing: the human presence. They are relatively quiet and safe in the exhibition room. They are planning to do nothing.

However, when a human gets close to Anima, we see how he becomes paralyzed and then we see how his body swells. He starts to exhale and inhale exaggeratedly, as if he were out of breath (or as if he were full of it?). Gradually, the only orifice– a small hole on one side of his body- starts to dilate. The orifice opens and closes by the rhythm of his breathing. Anima is exhaling a dry air over the humans.

When a human gets close to Alexitimia we will not see her reacting at all. She will stay immobile and still until someone, intentionally or unintentionally, touches her. Alexitimia has a tactile way of perception and can only express herself through the surface of her body. Therefore, when someone touches her, her body sweats. Alexitimia has developed a behavior analogous to the process of perspiration of the human skin.

And so, if I have said before that the behavior, the personality and the body’s shape of my art robots –under an AC conception- are seen as a whole, it is, first, because I am trying to evade the pervasive split mind/body tradition, and second, because I believe that we –human animals- do not have behaviors or personalities out there flying in the air: we do have Embodied Behaviors and Embodied Personalities. Anima and Alexitimia are, then, my personal artistic attempt towards that idea.

Obviously, I am not saying that with these pieces I am resolving some of the biggest problems scientists and engineers have when trying to create an intelligent machine. In any way that’s my point. If my artworks can show just a little “intelligence” (if any) is definitely enough for me to promote a viewer’s personal thinking. As I said before, I am not here to provide answers. I am just here as an artist: an artist who is not talking about robotics, AI or AL per se, but about “embodiment”. 
Part Three. Performing “the otherness”

Part 3. a. Inter-species encounters: human/machine/animal relations

“Separating the work from the artist (giving it discrete formal/external existence) gives it independent status as an artwork but decreases its potential strength as a catalytic agent”, Adrian Piper.

Act I
Using the prosthetic belly that my mom fabricated for me, I give birth to 23 furry creatures that I installed in the gallery space so they interact with each other, and/or with the viewers.

Act II
I decided to make a human-sized furry ball that will interact with the viewers. Yet, I did not to use robotic technology to artificially reproduce its intelligence, behavior, or personality. I decided to be hidden inside its body, giving it life.

Act III
I designed and constructed a simple and “futile” machine to transport milk. I decided to condemn myself to perform with this machine; I sentenced myself to collect the dripping milk with my dress.

Act IV
After arriving to the States, I started to eat my English/Spanish dictionary on a daily basis.

And so, did I give up on robotics? Did I give up on trying to create “artificial corporealities” that along with an “artificial intelligence” can create a creature smart enough to bodily interact with the viewers? I don’t think so. I believe this new body of work is just a moment “in-between”: the result of a reciprocal exchange of readings, knowledge, experiences, concepts, forms, aesthetics, and so on. It is, indeed, another attempt to talk about the same issues, a different iteration for representing/enacting the same idea of “embodiment”.

For me, the process of working in Robotic Art, is a continuous effort not only to understand technologies, but also, a continuous struggle to understand the human being, which is -at the very end- the subject that will interact and “live” with this technological apparatus that I create (I’m not talking just about the role of art viewers, but also about myself as a human-animal artist). For that reason, the works described in this chapter
were inspired by a different set of emotional and affective reactions that were born in the process of creating and developing Anima and Alextimia:
- my personal attachment and emotional relationship I establish with this artificial creatures;
- the continuous exchange dialogue I have with technology, art, and contemporary posthumanist theories;
- the possibility/impossibility of creating “Artificial Corporealities”;
- the incessant exploration on human/machine interactions or “inter-species encounters”;
- my personal endeavor to work against the traditional Cartesian distinctions and, as a extension of it, against the traditional human/animal distinctions;
- el hecho de que estoy viviendo y trabajando como extranjera/inmigrante en un pais ajeno al mio;
- and lastly, my eternal battle against the distinction between “New Media Art” or “Electronic Art” or “Art&Technology”, and the more established and “traditional Art”.

As a result, the more I think about this body of work, the more I believe that “Becoming Anomal”, “BecomingWith”, “Desiring-Machine I”, and “pica”, were born as my personal artistic response to the contemporary ‘question of posthumanism’. As Cary Wolfe explains: “[the question of posthumanism] actually enables us to describe the human and its characteristic modes of communication, interaction, meaning, social significations, and affective investments with greater specificity once we have removed meaning from the ontologically closed domain of consciousness, reason, reflection, and so on. It forces us to rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes and affective states of Homo sapiens itself, by recontextualizing them in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings and their own autopoietic ways of ‘bringing forth a world’—ways that are, since we ourselves are human animals, part of the evolutionary history and behavioral and psychological repertoire of the human itself. But it also insists that we attend to the specificity of the human –its ways of being in the world, its ways of knowing, observing, and describing- by acknowledging that it is fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically ‘not-human’ and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is. (For Derrida, of course, this includes the most fundamental prostheticity of all: language in the broadest sense)” (Cary Wolfe, pp XXV).

Which is to say, I see Becoming Anomal, BecomingWith, pica and the Desiring-Machine I, as my first attempt to rethink embodiment in relation to the Deleuze and Guattari’s well-know idea of “body without organs”. To begin with, it means that I no longer talk of the body, or even for the matter of a body, in the traditional sense. Rather, “the body” is now seen as a kind of virtuality, one that is, precisely for that reason, all the more real. The idea of “body without organs” speaks about the body as an open system, the body as pure potential, an
unfolding of impulses from an aleatory outside. In this series the body is seen as a multiplicity. The “body” of these artworks –i.e.: my own body- is in dialogue with other different bodies, with the non-human, unconscious, irrational multiplicity that inhabits in us.

If Anima and Alexitimia proposed a “bodily inter-species encounter” between a robotic agent and the viewer, this series of work goes a little bit further and propose a more complex relation of bodies: the artist’s body and an artificial creature, the artist’s body and a machine, the human-animal viewers’ body in relation to the human-animal-female-hispanic body of the artist, the viewers’ body and an artificial creature or a machine...That is to say, a set of relations that Deleuze and Guattari would call a “machinic heterogenesis”, a becoming that operates in transgression not only of species boundaries but of boundaries between nature and artifice, science and art.

“Because the artist is the embodiment of a particular creative process, artworks can abandon the intermediary of the discrete form and base themselves on this type of impact. The artist himself becomes the catalytic agent inducing change in the viewer; the viewer responds to the catalytic presence of the artist as artwork. This is not to be confused with life as art or the artist’s personality as art. The aesthetic formality and artifice of the work temporarily replace or veil the personal attributes of the artist as a private individual. The artwork consists in artificially assumed attributes of the artist”, Adrian Piper.

And so, if I can say that, along with Anima and Alexitimia, Becoming Anomal, BecomingWith, Desiring-Machine I, and pica can be considered (as said in chapter 1) an exploration on the notion of embodiment; It is the performative aspect of this notion of embodiment that is fundamental in these last four works. Therefore, if both series of work share –to some extent- the same theoretical and conceptual background, it is their artistic medium/media what makes them different. Now, there is not only an “artificial body” in the works, but it is the artist’s own body that has assumed the primary position. Body art is viewed here as a set of performative practices that, through such intersubjective engagement, instantiate the dislocation or decentering of the Cartesian subject of modernism. This dislocation is, I believe, the most profound difference in relation to my previous robotic works.
Part 3.b. The case of Becoming Anomal and BecomingWith

“Don’t ask what it means or what it refers to. Don’t ask what the work is. Rather, see what the work does”, Eva Hesse.

They are furry and rounded balls.
23 are dark brown (and small).
Only one is white (and big).
The 23 brown furry balls are coming from my own body. I gave them birth.
The white is already there. I jump inside it and I stay contained by its body.
The brown furry balls are alive, they can move freely without anyone’s help.
The white ball is almost dead until I animate it with my own body movements.
One is titled “Becoming Anomal” the other one is “BecomingWith (or the revised version of the Mechanical Turk)”.

Figure 3. Becoming Anomal.
Performance/Installation (2008)
Fabric, latex globes, animal fur, custom electronics
Variable dimensions – Variable duration

Figure 4. BecomingWith (or the revised version of the Mechanical Turk).
Performance/Installation (2009)
artificial white fur, inflatable ball
Dimension: 51” diameter
Variable duration
But, besides their differences, both arise from three very personal and emotional feelings: First, my exhaustion from using robotic technologies to achieve different kind of movements, behaviors and personalities, and the frustrations when not arriving to the artificiality I was looking for. Second, from the intimate affiliation I usually establish with my robots where they are no longer my artworks but my “companion species”; probably, as a response to Haraway’s question of “Who ‘we’ will become when species meet?” Por último, como respuesta (casi inconciente) al contexto en el que se desarrollaron estas obras, y como manifestación a mi condición de “The Other” que me toca vivir en este país.

**Becoming Anomal**

Neither this nor that, but both, or something in between.

Or I should say: anomal=anomalous but anomal≠abnormal
And also, Becoming NOT Being
And also, Anomal not Animal -but animal and anomaly?
… Onto my body, from my body, to the body.

**BecomingWith (or the revised version of the Mechanical Turk)**

Embodied and interdependent entities.
Or better said, the human and non-human in a new (artificial?) embodiment that does not accept definitions: “the uncanny in-between”.
And so, an inter/intra corporeality between different kind of bodies.
And so, the enactment of the multiplicity.
… or, simply, the subject -and object- shaping dance of encounters? (D. Haraway)

When Deluze and Guattari write of “becoming animal”, they destabilize the strict (and possible arbitrary) boundaries modernity established between humanity and the animal kingdom. Their sweeping notion of “becoming” takes on diverse fields such as “becoming geology,” “becoming woman,” and “becoming-imperceptible”, but it is at its most acute with animals. Rather than fixed and discreet, for Deleuze and Guattari, the individual is an ever-shifting being, a “desiring machine” that can take on new forms of animal-ness (or an animal capable of taking on forms of human-ness). Similarly, the term “becoming” allows for exchange between otherwise static conceptions of the world: man/nature, man/woman, I/we, human/animal. For me, the idea of the animal is just a trigger to speak about our human “other-ness” or, better said, the possibility of thinking ourselves interacting with different kind of bodies.
Part 3.c. The case of *pica* and Desiring-Machine I (*y/o la reencarnación femenina de Sísifo*)

“Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheuren Ungeziefer verwandelt. Er lag auf seinem panzerartig harten Rücken und sah, wenn er den Kopf ein wenig hob, seinen gewölbten, braunen, von bogenförmigen Versteifungen geteilten Bauch, auf dessen Höhe sich die Bettdecke, zum gänzlichen Niedergleiten bereit, kaum noch erhalten konnte. Seine vielen, im Vergleich zu seinem sonstigen Umfang kläglich dünnen Beine flimmerten ihm hilflos vor den Augen.

»Was ist mit mir geschehen?«, dachte er. Es war kein Traum.

- Die Verwandlung, Franz Kafka (The opening paragraph of the “The Metamorphosis” by Kafka)

They are performative acts.

They are the enactment of a human being seen as prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various technicity and materiality: one language; the other, the industrial machine.

One action is an attempt to “embody” a foreign language.

The other action is an attempt to “mend” a futile milk machine.

And so, both perform an identity tenuously constituted in time - an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts.

As a result, both are endless actions. They can be performed *ad nauseam*.

From a very Camusian perspective, both are an effort to understand how we experience the “Absurd” and how we live with it.

In these acts, it is not the world that is absurd, nor human thought: the absurd arises when the human need-to-understand, meets the unreasonableness of the world, when "my appetite for the absolute and for unity" meets "the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle."

One performance is titled “*pica*”; the other one is “Desiring-Machine I (*y/o la reencarnación femenina de Sísifo*)”.

Every day I sit down in front of my English/Spanish dictionary and, following alphabetic order, I pick up a word. I cut the English portion and I eat it. *pica* is a work-in-progress performance of indefinite duration that I started a few weeks after arriving to the US that I will probably finish when I leave the country again. As an attempt to embody a non-native language, I decided to eat one different English word each day. Thus, in a very intimate gesture, through a repetition of acts in time, I attempt to remove the disembodied power of having to speak a foreign and “artificial” language. But also, perhaps, by digesting English words, I also attempt to digest the simple implications of being a Hispanic speaker in the US.

O, mejor dicho, después de algunos meses de extranjería, comenzé a sentir un constante estado de agotamiento, agobio e impotencia por tener que hablar día tras días en un idioma que no me pertenece. La constante frustración de no encontrar palabras para nombrar determinadas cosas, la pérdida de espontaneidad al hablar e interactuar con otros y, por sobre todo, la indiferencia emotivota/aftectiva que me producían estas palabras en otro idioma, dieron como resultado que un día me levantase de la cama pensando que si digeria físicamente las palabras -tal vez- las incorporaría, las asimilaría y por fin hasta las sentiría.

¿Dio resultado? Tan solo llevo comidas 353 (al 1 de Junio) palabras del diccionario. Tal vez no sea suficiente. Sin duda *pica* es una obra catártica y por ello pienso continuar digiriendo el Ingles hasta mis últimos días en este país.
Y no… todavía no es lo mismo decir “I love you” que decir “Te amo”, la segunda sin duda retumba en mi pecho y en mi vientre… la primera me produce tanta indiferencia como decir “I hate you”. Todavía nada. Nada.

Am I the contemporary female Sisyphus?
And so, am I the “absurd heroine”?
If so, is my revolt against which kind of absurdity?
Art? My relationship to my own artwork, my condition as an artist?
Or, even deeper, the absurdity of speaking about human/machine interactions, my human-animal condition, my women (potential mother) condition, or even the fact that I am a Latina trying to work in the “white America”?

This is not nihilism.
My own sentence to this milk machine is either a paradox or an absurdity.

“In a desiring-machine everything functions at the same time, but amid hiatuses and ruptures, breakdowns and failures, stalling and short-cuts, distances and fragmentations, within a sum that never succeeds in bringing its various part together so as to form a whole. That is because the breaks in the process are productive, and are reassemblies in and of themselves”, Deleuze and Guattari – AntiOedipus.
I have created a simple machine to transport milk throughout the gallery space. On one side of the machine - where the milk seems to be coming from - there is a small space I made with cloth curtains. On the other side, the milk is leaking outside the machine from the end of a small plastic tube that is being driven by a cam mechanism.

There I am: trying to hold that milk with the dress I have attached to my own wrists...the architecture of the dress is transformed to support the action. I try to hold as much milk as I can; then, I go, I enter to a small curtain space, and I pour the milk back to its origin.

And so, why do I choose to perform a “futile” task over and over again?
Why I am trying to hold the milk? Why I am taking it back to its origin?

But, before that, why would I build a “useless” machine? And then, condemn myself to try to fix it? Perhaps, because, when enacting the absurd heroine role, I am ultimately developing a revolution that is based neither on beginnings nor on ends but on middles – the moments in between, the unpredictable interstices of process, movement, and inventions.
A conclusion

And so, to conclude: whether creating a robot or performing with a machine or an artificial creature, my work is always an attempt to promote a bodily and corporeal “inter-species” encounter, and so, an attempt to avoid a practical, rational, utilitarian, and calculated “dialogue” - i.e. interaction. For that reason, I like to consider my work as a political proclamation for the encounter not just between a viewer and an artwork, but the encounter between a human being and “significant others.”

Then -by looking back and greeting “significant otherness” again and again- I hope to achieve Donna Haraway’s ideal of a multispecies future where we become “messmates” with those “others” that induce panic and anxiety in the centers of power and self-certainly. Anima, Alexitimia, Becoming Anomal, BecomingWith, pica and the Desiring-Machine I (…and hopefully some other artworks that I can create in the future) are my “messmates”. In my artwork, I try to recreate a scenario where my viewers “become with” my art. However, in order to do that I already “become with” them from the very beginning of their conception. They became my “companion species” simply because, as Haraway proclaimed, “we look back at each other, sticky with all our muddled histories”.

Therefore, if we can think of Anima and Alexitimia, the creatures of Becoming Anomal, BecomingWith, or even myself in the Desiring-Machine I and pica, as “significant otherness”, outside the security checkpoint of bright reason, placed in an indiscernible zone without borders, it is probably because they are looking back and meeting their creator: a Woman, Latina, Sanjuanina, Spanish speaker and brown skinned, who works with Technologies and lives in “the White America”.

Another conclusion (not an addendum but some sort of essential acknowledgment)

Last but not least.
So far, this thesis paper seemed to be an analytical, formal, and conceptual collection of writings about my work, in which I use concepts and ideas from thinkers like Deleuze and Guattari, Donna Haraway, Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe, Aristotle, Alfonso Lingis (or, even without mention it, others like Derrida, Bruno Latour, Judith Butler, Foucault, and so on...)

However, I must say that it will not be fair if I end this paper without mentioning my very fundamental sources of inspiration and the reason why I still choose to make art.

Artistically, aesthetically, visually, emotionally, affectively and even conceptually, my references are these nine ladies and these two men’ works: artists that I like to speak to, artists that (even without knowing it) listen to me everyday, helping me to be an artist (although, it is so embarrassing to call myself an artist when I think of them);

Ana Mendieta
Rebecca Horn
Eva Hesse
Marina Abramovic
Mona Hatoum
Adrian Piper
Louise Bourgeois
Frida Kahlo
Janine Antonie
Tehching Hsieh
Joseph Beuys

It could be said that their own artworks embody those posthumanist theories I mentioned before, but that is not the reason why I profoundly Admire, Respect, Honor and Love them.

The reason is so simple: they not allow any kind of rationalization, their work avoid definitions. Their work does not sound in my mind, but in my chest.

And then, tengo que dejar de hablar en Inglés y decirles en Español que sueño con el día en que alguna de mis obras provoque en algún espectador tanta alegría/emoción/llanto/tristeza/melancolía/felicidad como sus obras provocan en mi. Tan solo pido un segundo, un micro-segundo en el que una de mis obras provoque en otro sujeto esa intensidad innombrable, absouluta y desmedida.

...tal vez nunca lo logre, quien sabe? pero aquí mismo me comprometo a trabajar al cansancio para lograrlo, prometo en su honor, nunca dejar de ser honesta con mi obra y mi público..y, sino, retirarme. Me comprometo a nunca dejar de comprometerme.
References


Figure 7. Anima. Autonomous Robotic Agent (2009) - Close-up breathing orifice -
Figure 8. *Anima*. Autonomous Robotic Agent (2009) - Viewers Interaction -

Figure 9. *Anima*. Autonomous Robotic Agent (2009) - Viewers Interaction -
Figure 10. *Anima. Autonomous Robotic Agent* (2009)
- 3D sketch -

Figure 11. *Anima. Autonomous Robotic Agent* (2009)
- Photos of work in progress -
Figure 12. *Becoming Anomal*, Performance/Installation (2008-09)
- Performance documentation -
Figure 13. **Becoming Anomalous**. Performance/Installation (2008-09)

- Photo of Bag (prosthetic belly) with mask and latex gloves hanged on the wall.
Figure 14. **Becoming Anomalous**. Performance/Installation (2008-09) - Photos of work in progress -

Figure 15. **Becoming With (or the revised version of the Mechanical Turk)**. Performance/Installation (2009) - Photos of work in progress -
Figure 16. *BecomingWith* (or the revised version of the Mechanical Turk). Performance/Installation (2009)

Figure 17. *BecomingWith* (or the revised version of the Mechanical Turk). Performance/Installation (2009) - Viewer Interaction -
Figure 18. *pica*. Performance (2009-ongoing)
- Performance documentation: February 1st to 28th, 2010 –
Figure 19. *Pica*. Performance (2009–ongoing)

- Dictionary’s photo –
Figure 20 and 21. Desiring-Machine I (y/o la reencarnación femenina de Sísifo) (2010).
Multimedia Installation/Performance
Figure 22. Desiring-Machine I (y/o la reencarnación femenina de Sísifo) (2010).
- 3D installation/machine design -
Figure 23. Desiring-Machine I (y/o la reencarnación femenina de Sísifo) (2010).
- Photo of work in progress -

Figure 24. Desiring-Machine I (y/o la reencarnación femenina de Sísifo) (2010).
- Photo of dress design -
- For more information: www.paulagaetano.com.ar -