



Convers/acciones

**On the mental life and spatial symptoms
of the digital self.**

**Interview with Angeliki Malakasioti
by Chris H. Gray**

*Sobre la vida mental y los síntomas espaciales
del yo digital.*

Entrevista a Angeliki Malakasioti por Chris H. Gray

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ABSTRACT

From the celestial to the cyberspatial sphere and from imaginary beings to self-constructed online personas, symptom constellations are representing our 'way of being'. Using this as a vaulting point, Angeliki Malakasioti is taking symptom representation a step further, towards the reasons of manifestation, towards observation and reflection on the phenomena of digital

experience. Her research is a diagnostic experiment and at the same time a theoretical as well as an artistic body of work that comments on the mental qualities of the cyborg when inhabiting cyberspace. Aspects of the digital self are discussed and its symptoms are interpreted into spatial qualities; into imaginary semi-living beings and intimate non-spaces.

KEYWORDS

Cyborg, mental space, digital self, symptom, constellation.

RESUMEN

Desde lo celestial a la esfera ciberespacial y desde los seres imaginarios a las personas autoconstruidas en red, las constelaciones de síntomas dibujan nuestra “forma de ser”. Desde esta bóveda como punto de partida Angeliki Malakasioti deja atrás el sentido clásico del síntoma y sus representaciones y profundiza en las razones de su presencia a través de la observación y la reflexión en torno al fenómeno de la experiencia digital. Su investigación cabría definirla como un diagnóstico experimental al igual que un trabajo teórico y artístico que repara en las dimensiones y características mentales del ciborg que habita el ciberespacio. A lo largo de esta entrevista a cargo de Chris H. Gray, Angeliki señala algunos aspectos del yo digital además de ofrecer una interpretación de sus síntomas a partir de dimensiones espaciales, en concreto los no lugares íntimos que habita el yo digital desde su condición de pseudo-ser imaginario.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Ciborg, constelaciones, espacio mental, síntoma, yo digital.

Angeliki Malakasioti is an architect pursuing her doctorate. She presented her 3-D virtual representations of cyborg psychological symptoms at the Amber '09 conference in Istanbul that explored the idea of the "Uncyborgable."

Volos, Greece, June 2012

Where do you work?

I am currently in the 3rd year of my doctorate at the Department of Architecture at the University of Thessaly. I have been working as a part time assistant tutor in some of the department's courses, and also I am a member of an ongoing research program, which deals with the notion of space in video games.

So what lead you to apply to the Uncyborgable conference in Istanbul?

You mean the first one?

Yes, the one we went to.

This participation was the first presentation of the work that I've been doing the last three years, the first public discussion about the initial findings of my research.

So why the cyborg? Why did you choose that?

What I find extremely interesting is the cyborg in the context of its mental dimension, so, in my work, I'm trying to understand all the noetic and mind qualities that this cyborgization process has developed.

Oh, so how it changes peoples' consciousness?

Mhmm. Actually, I could say that it is rather the psychological cyborg that I am investigating. It is the mental part of it, the extension of its mental being.

This is something Heidi Figueroa-Sarriera writes about. There is a book, I don't know if you have seen it, *Cyberpsychology?* (<http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?pid=258710>) Angel Gordo-Lopez edited it and Heidi is in it. That's what they look at too.

Yes, and this work is always developing parallel to my background as an architect. I'm influenced by that and for that reason, I investigate these ideas through their spatial qualities. I'm interested in the kind of space that the cyborg lives in – this state of inhabitancy – and their two-way interaction.

And as someone who not only creates these spaces, both physical and virtual, but also creates art that is digital, you are very much a cyborg. You examine your own mental processes and how being intimate with technology changes who you are.

Yes, exactly, I'm trying to see how the whole technological evolution is mirrored in the structural qualities of our identities and personalities. I find modern theories about the self very appealing and parallel to that, I try to understand how the digital self constitutes an ontology and how does it exist? In what sense and what context? Then, I'm trying to invent a kind of body for this 'self', a kind of body that will host the self in cyberspace.

Does it make a difference that you are a woman or that you're Greek and sort of on the periphery of power in the world...

I think it makes a difference that I'm Greek in the sense that for the time being, the Greek cyborg, currently under the election period, is probably a depressed cyborg, or I could say an aggressive cyborg. But I think this is a common feeling in such a context.

For all humanity?

For our nationality at the moment, but yes, it could be also for all humanity when experiencing situations like this pre-election period during political crisis for example. And I'm interested in seeing how all these phenomena are reflected back in the mental constitution of the cyborg.

But also as a creator of spaces in architecture and art, you have a different relationship to technology that's different maybe than most people who live in the spaces you create and who see the art you create. Does this give you more agency as a cyborg , more power? Or do you think it does not make much of a difference?

Yes, I feel it gives power - it is actually the power of infinite possibilities, since we are talking about an immaterial space. You have no gravity, you have no physical rules. You have no sense of the physical body, so you have to reinvent the body to incorporate this kind of digital self you want to realize. I think this affects me a lot; and maybe this is the main reason why I was so much attracted by this space.

Well people who don't create in this way, do you think there is an alienation more of an anger that they feel something is being done *to* them? They don't have agency?

What do you mean, the people who don't create what?

Who don't create or have control over cyborg space. You can think of it many number of ways. In our society some people create cyborg technoscience: doctors who invent new ways of healing people; prosthetics; genetic engineering; people who design human machine interfaces; architects who build spaces; and game designers who create games that peoples consciousness go into; artists who make digital art. But then many people they don't create anything cyborgian. They are just operated on. They play the game, they watch the piece of art, they go into the building or the virtual space. So I'm curious if you think, as someone who is more of a creator, if you have different feelings towards this especially now in Greece with the political situation where people have lost power to control their economic lives. But already around the world people have lost the power to control their techno lives. When I was young you could fix your own car; now you need a computer to fix a car. It's harder and harder. Some people, like my son, can go into a computer and put it together, but most people can't.

I think that we have not yet realized how we can fully exploit all these technological extensions available. As a creator I feel I am trying to communicate through this technology and try to encourage thinking back about ourselves through the experience of these digital spaces. Keeping

always in mind that innumerable people inhabit these digital environments now, and they all have a digital shadow, a digital footprint that appears sometimes. This means that this space supersedes the physical existence. Nowadays, you might have a digital shadow even before you are born, or after you die. I think people have not yet realized the power of this medium.

So you want to empower them?

Yes, I think about it in terms of ‘expression’, and I try through this work to offer the stimulation for thinking back about how we act in these kinds of spaces, how we make use of them, how we can construct personalities and how this can be a tool, maybe, for some other kind of expression. And this expression could be also regarded as a process of ‘mastering’ the available technological tools, or correspondingly, the digital space – modern man transforms into a ‘director’ of himself in cyberspace; he is, nowadays, not a mere addressee of events, but an active rather than a passive cyberspatial entity.

It was also very interesting how you said we have a digital self but it precedes us being born and it exists after we die, because before, when people first started noticing how much of ourselves were digital, they talked about a digital doppelganger. But a doppelganger is the same, and as you put it the digital self is different. It extends at least in time much further than we do.

In the beginning we thought our digital projection was just a shadow of our physical projection, but afterwards, when I think about it, I realize our digital projection has its own shadow. We have the footprint, our first existence in there, and then we have its shadow, which is this kind of informational body that exists without us realizing it. For example, there are all these websites watching you when you move through the Internet, and all this information produced from your activity in cyberspace, and I believe that therefore, this is the ‘shadow of the shadow’, it is another kind of relationship. And also, I consider this as a very interesting paradox – the fact that we have this kind of shadow before our existence. It is not a shadow fixed to our physical body like in material space, but something free-agent, or sometimes detached, that acts on its own.

Acts on its own?

I mean that someone else is capable of producing our shadow before we even exist. Take for example, the case of a blog post of a baby's ultrasound before it is born. Before even having the baby, we have its digital existence on the internet. But also when someone dies, his Facebook account might remain active. There have also been some interesting projects on the idea of digital self-continuation. In all these cases, the agency is displaced; there is an interesting act of transference of the agency itself.

But still agency really always comes from people, some person posts the ultrasound and even now there are Facebook pages for many people who have died. You might plan your Facebook page for when you die, producing the virtual self, the digital shadow and certainly the shadow of the shadow, but there is no agency that I see.

What do you mean by agency here?

It does not really do it itself. It's all done by humans. But you have other humans just as in real physical life. Humans become part of you, your loved ones and so on, but in the digital world too others shape who you are, so that is very true. I'm always very sensitive about where agency is, where the real power to act comes from. Like Bruno Latour says, "Agency comes from things." Have you read his work?

Yes. The second context of shadow is not the kind of power of ourselves, there is no agency there.

Yes, so I disagree with Bruno Latour. I think he is naïve. That is just one of my things, but that makes me ask this digital self, how is it different in terms of gender and race and class? Is your digital self as Greek as you are? Is it as much a woman? You know there is a famous joke that shows two dogs on a computer and one dog says, "on the Internet no one knows you are a dog."

I know this.

But actually for your real digital self they know you are Greek, because of your long beautiful complicated name, who could not know this? And probably they can figure out you are a woman. But maybe in some ways you are not as much a pure woman as physically embodied, and maybe not even as much Greek. Maybe class is not as clear, because you can be very poor or even rich, but the digital image is much more the work you do, the pictures posted. But that may not be true. What do you think?

Sometimes, it doesn't play such an important role, but even when it does, I think the internet is an interesting space for experimentation because people are offered the opportunity to become really playful with their identities. We observe false-nationalities, avatar creations, carefully directed self-projections, software for self-management - all constituting 'switch-on switch-off' scenarios of the digital self.

Like Elif? (Elf Ayiter: <http://citrinitas.com>, a brilliant Turkish researcher-artist we met who has multiple identities in Second Life.)

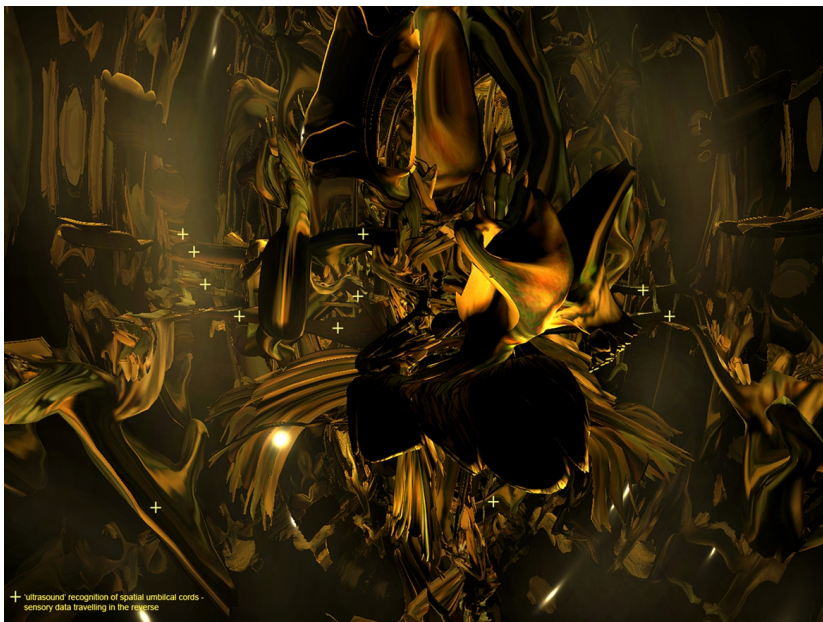
Yes, exactly, like Elif. What I find really interesting is the fact that in the past, having this kind of flexible identity was not that acceptable, but nowadays we are starting to embrace this kind of possibility, this space, let us say.

This is what people like Sandy Stone and Pat Califia argue. Do you know their work?

No.

They argue this in terms of transgender sexual identity in a physical way, that now you can go from male to female and female to male through sexual reassignment surgery, or just go half way taking the hormones, that breaks down binary gender. It builds freedom that now in the real world people can create an identity that's not a pure man or pure woman.

Exactly. And it's not that this identity stays in there [digital space]. For example, if I have 10 different personalities in there, it *does* affect myself in the physical world. We start seeing effects like a 'bleeding', as if the digital realities are bleeding out into the physical world. And also the multiplicity of digital selves starts becoming one kind of personality that integrates all these different parts. So maybe this could be a social change; I believe it would be very interesting to begin thinking of new ways of organizing social systems, based, not on stabilized personalities and identities, but on more unpredictable ones.



Yes, it is but how much of this is shaped by the corporations and the governments that have their own interests of control and profit? Because when we do this work we use Toshiba and we do it with government universities with their little grants if they deign to give us money and so on, and the corporate interests which you certainly see with social media with Facebook and with Google taking pictures of everything. How much of this is being shaped by people with their desires, and how much of this shadow world and shadow's shadow that bleeds back and forth into reality, I like this very much, is shaped by other forces like big institutions?

I do not know the extent, but I do believe that partially this is a kind of 'programming', since we might think of ourselves as a kind of software in there. I believe that there is a kind of re-programming that could be used as a kind of control.

Are you in sympathy with groups like Anonymous...Do you know Anonymous?

Yes.

...who try to rebel or resist what they argue is the colonization of cyberspace or do you see them as crazy maybe? What do you think of them?

I'm not that well-informed about Anonymous so as to answer this question. But I have a feeling that they might be consisting of different groups (*which, as a process of 'fragmentation', could raise a lot of interesting issues for discussion*).

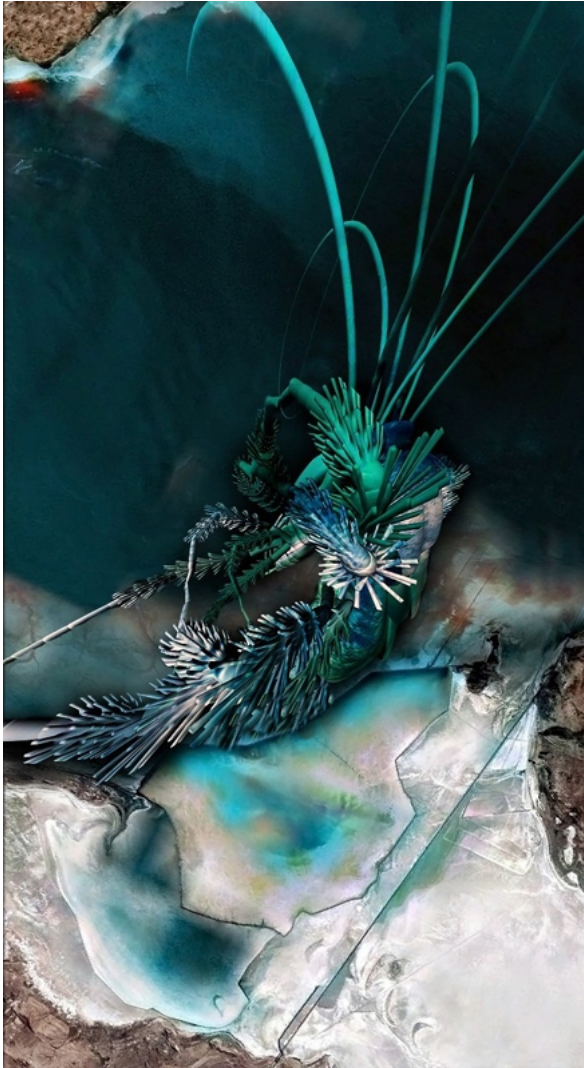
Well yes that is very true.

After lunch we moved on to a discussion of Angeliki's *Cyborg Symptoms* art work.

[Abstract of Body Species Artwork]

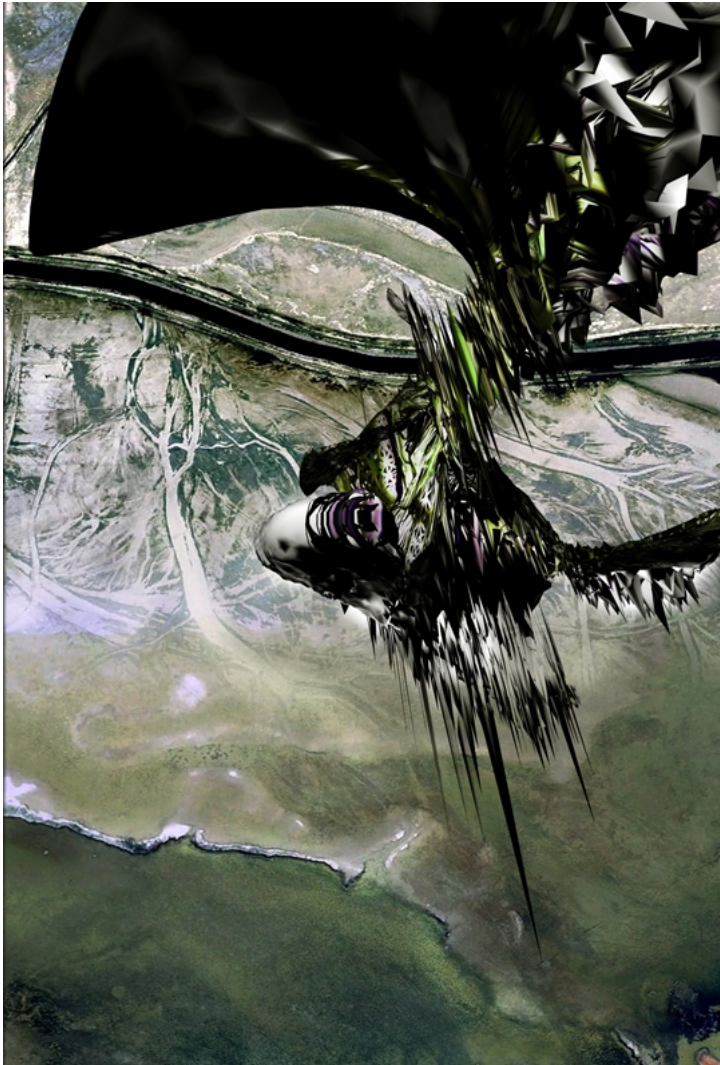
Recently, one of my basic tools for drawing is the concept of 'symptom'. I chose this concept because I'm exploring the mental space and how this is inhabited. So what I needed was a kind of vocabulary in order to talk about it. Getting inspired by the descriptions of mental diagnosis and all relative phenomena, I chose the 'symptom' as a guide, as a code, in order to talk about the digital self and the phenomena in cyberspace. So starting from every symptom I try to 'corpo-realize' the self again, to create the image of a body again. My scope is to eventually create a series of beings, like a new kind of species that live in the digital world. Firstly, I make a hypothesis that there is an imaginary being, and afterwards, I try to create 'a book of imaginary beings', like Borges did. I love his description about the zoo of mythology, when he is talking about another kind of universe where his imaginary beings live.

So, having symptoms as the starting point, these are the latest things that I have been doing. You can see for example "The Histrionic Symptom", which has to do with cyberspace. The cyborg in cyberspace has a kind of histrionic, narcissistic personality; he wants to be heard all the time, to be contacted all the time and does not want to be left alone.



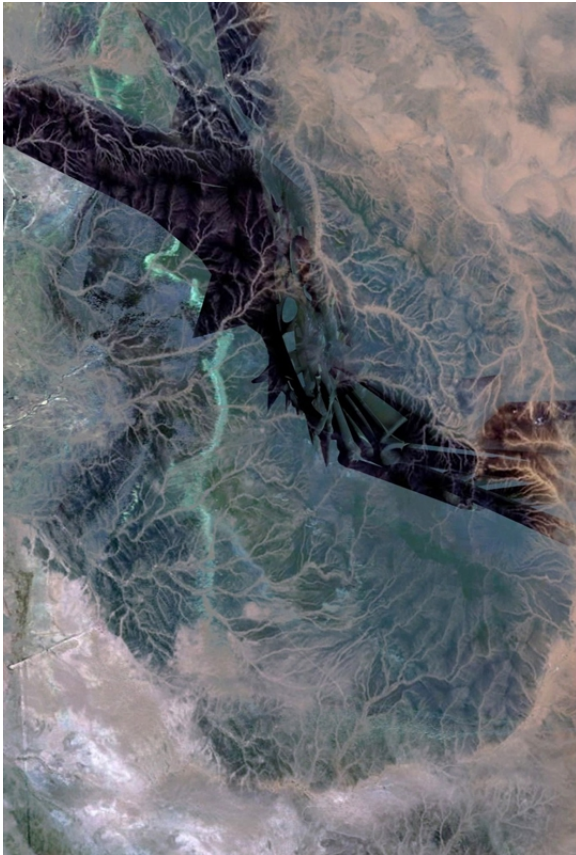
[The Histrionic Symptom]

And this is “The Aggressive Symptom,” I guess its form speaks on its own.



[The Aggressive Symptom]

“The Nebulosity Symptom” has to do with disorientation in digital space and the experience of obscure environmental awareness.



[The Nebulosity Symptom]

What programs do you use and what is the process?

It's a combination of techniques. There is always a 3D modeling design process in the beginning, trying to make a form that expresses more or less my idea. This is how I initially create this kind of being. Then, I proceed with a series of drawings that manifest the being in there, this kind of 'monster', let us say.

Do you know the term from Donna Haraway, “hopeful monsters” she writes about? How the cyborg and other creatures can be seen as monsters, but they are hopeful monsters because they offer something.

Yes, like heroes and monsters of the same kind.

Afterwards I try to put them in an environment. So in this series the idea was to put them in the fake environment of Google Earth. So, after choosing various abstracts of Google Earth I tried to make another planet which I will call “Googol Earth.” I use this term because it is said that Google gained its name from ‘googol’, a mathematical unit representing a huge number of possibilities. So I tried to invert Google again and create the Googol planet, and make the infinitely possible beings that inhabit this planet, hopeful monsters.

And what is the program you use for the 3D?

I'm using different 3D modeling softwares, and then I make use of animation features to create short films. In other cases, I use a kind of image collage in order to create the surrounding environment.

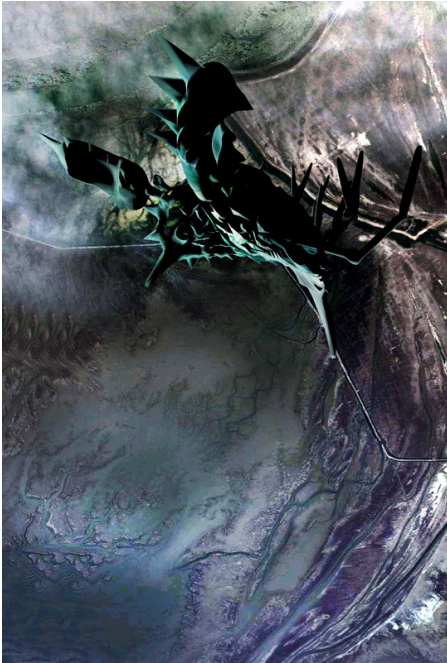
And similar, yet more generalized, one of my favorite symptoms is the one that has to do with imaginary constructions: ‘Pseudologia Fantastica’, referring to the fake, the false saying, the fantasizing of the imaginary. It has to do with all the feigned or malingering symptoms, and how we construct the reality on our own, how we use imagination as an ingredient during our interaction with digital space.

Yes, malingering, that’s a good word.



[Pseudologia Fantastica]

And this is “The Conversion Symptom.” This symptom actually talks about the overall concept of symptomatology, because conversion systems are psychogenic in nature; how we transverse the physical into the psychological; how this moves back and forth and what happens on this threshold.



[The Conversion Symptom]

And repression is a very important part of this, you are repressing something. We often say in Santa Cruz you have to watch for the return of the repressed. If you repress something some emotion, it will always come back but maybe you won't recognize it.

And it comes back in some other form.

Yes, so the return of the repressed. Many people would deny this, but you cannot repress something forever. Like the fear of death we were talking about, that I argue is such a part of American culture.

Fear comes back in another way, no?

Yes in television shows, in imperial dreams, in fundamentalist Christianity. It comes back in bad ways, mainly, although some of the TV shows are good.

So these are some of the last things.

This is very good, I definitely like this idea of the symptoms and the way you created these hopeful monsters in Google earth.

I use this concept, because the symptom has a kind of spatiality to me. As an architect, I see it as a form of manifestation that takes place in the body; it shows something that has occurred, like the top of an iceberg. It is a phenomenon that manifests itself to express something that is happening underneath. So I start from these kinds of small observations (individual phenomena of experience) and I try to see what is happening underneath, and talk about this kind of space in this context.

When you are actually creating these things, do you feel an anxiety when you are starting? Do you feel a satisfaction when you are done, and how do you know you are done?

I feel that I am personally connected to these creatures. I never know from the beginning what they will look like, but I accompany them until the end, until they take their final form and create a kind of life-story behind them. And this is how, through this process, I develop an intimate connection with them.

This is part of your digital shadow, it's like your shadow of consciousness.

Yes, I could describe it as a kind of portrait for me as well as for each one of them.

And is your connection stronger when you are creating or when it is finished? How do you know when a piece is finished?

I feel that my connection with them is always strong, even before their binary existence - from the time they are born, till they attain their final form. And this is because I can see the bits and bytes of myself in there. That is the moment when I think it is finished. When I feel like I have created a portrait for it that expresses its 'way of being', but also 'my way of being'.

It seems that I've always had an obsession with other beings. It was not in the concept of cyberspace but in the concept of absent space, since I've been doing research on the body without any sensory input.

Like in a sensory deprivation tank?

Exactly.

But even before that were you interested in other beings, like when you were little were you interested in the gods and goddesses, like Athena?

Not really.

Oh, because that is my fantasy of a Greek childhood.

But I feel that I've always played with the idea of animism. And what we are talking about here could be a kind of digital animism.

Yes, but its alive. Nature is animated, it has an animal spirit-- The Great Chain of Being. You know, this argument many cultures have this belief that everything has some life force, that it's alive and it's the chain of being. The life becomes more and more complex but the higher forms of life further along the chain, they owe the other forms honor and to protect them. It is very common in native American tribes in the United States, the Black-foot and so on, but in many cultures. It is a different way to seeing the universe like a machine, which is the Cartesian and Copernican model.

Talking about myths and beasts and beings, there is another idea concerning the combination of symptoms. Because the symptom doesn't stand on its own, it's always accompanied by something else, and the combination of them - a constellation of symptoms - creates a possible pathology or another state of being.

That's what the therapists say, a constellation of symptoms.

This is how I approach the phenomenon, this is where my vocabulary breaks down in symptoms. The word "constellation" also talks about mythical heroes and beasts, in other words, our semi-conscious or semi-living beings, in the celestial sphere or in the cyberspatial sphere.

Yes, and actually, just as the ancients looked in the sky and created monsters in the sky, you look on the computer and create them, but really in part they are reflections of your own thinking.

They are patterns of symptoms that I experience.

But the gods in the sky are a shadow version of what we have on earth. That makes sense...a projection. So you were going to show us the earlier things when you started this process?

These are things that I have been doing in my postgraduate course, four years earlier.

I think I saw some of these symptoms aren't in black and white they are sort of blue and black and white but here you have more colors right? But still the palette...oh I see yes there is more color but this one you just showed me is more colorful

This was also the idea of creating another being, but this time, the being was my body itself while in the deprivation tank, which we could say that could also stand as a metaphor for the abstract, fluid and immaterial nature of digital space.

Did you go in a tank? How long?

I tried it when I was in London. I spent one hour in there, you can't stay longer for the first time. It was a fantastic experience. Afterwards, I tried to talk about space in this context. So the main idea is that I'm trying to redraw my body, which is another concept of body, in a new immaterial space; in the tank you don't have any sensory input, so you have to understand how your body is performing in the absence of space.

But you're thinking, is three dimensional like this, when you had no sensory data?

Yes. These were, for example, abstracts of a feeling. I created a series of bodies based on the altered sensations I had in the sensory deprivation tank, and this is why this was also a deeply personal work I believe.

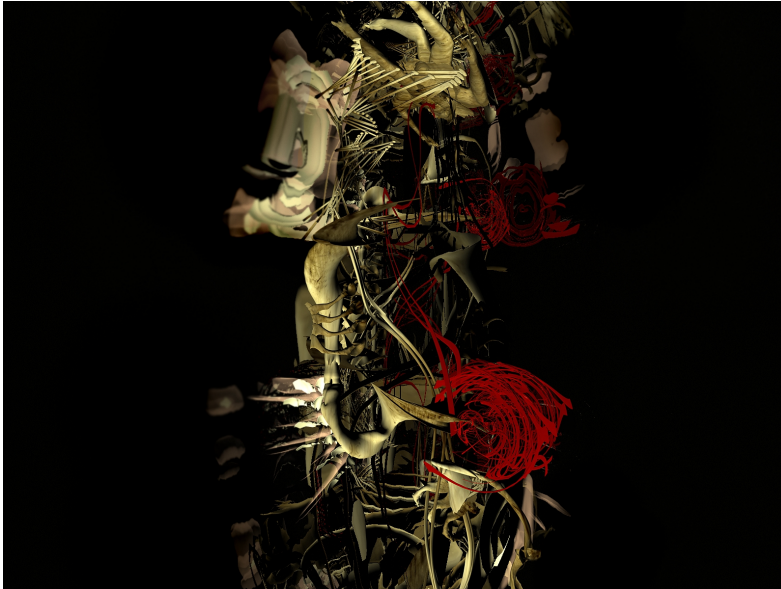


[Abstract of Body Species Artwork]

I can see it well when I look up close. But some of these I've seen I think, and I was really struck by how they seem so 3D. I did not realize you started with the 3D program.

Yes I start with 3D modeling. In some cases I also make use of photography of real objects or textures of real objects.

This is a body that was also animated slightly. It is supposed to be living in that non-space.



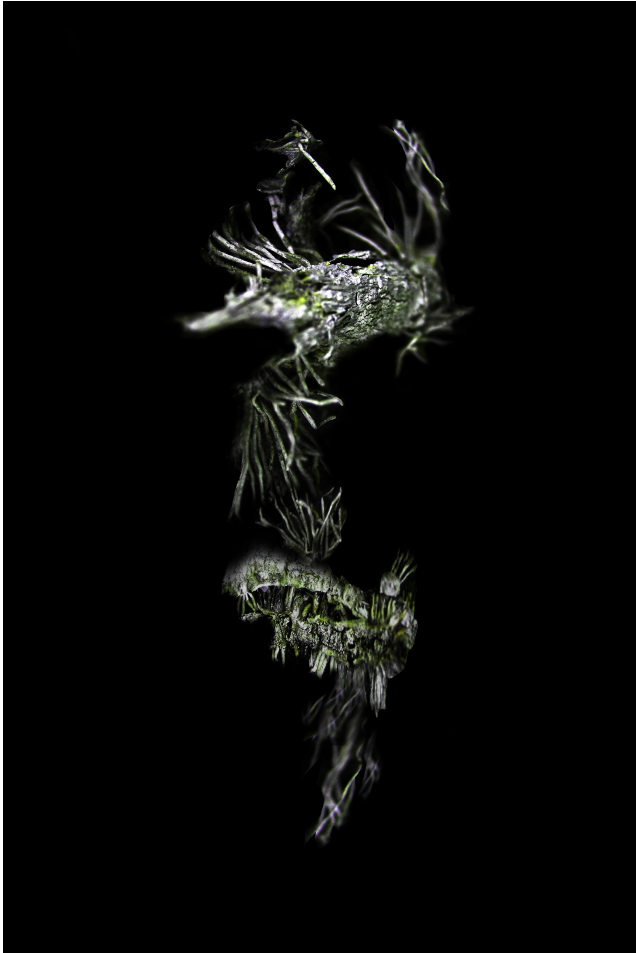
[Abstract of Body Species Artwork]

When you animate them do they move like jellyfish? Do they float a little?

Yes, this tiny movement is what I usually add in the end after creating these symptoms. Just a slight animation; I cannot imagine it as really aggressive, apart from the ‘aggressive’ one.

Maybe the aggressive one should float there and then get really big, so you watch and go 'WOAH,' or maybe you have one that is shy and is floating there and then goes really small. Because humans evolved to read and anthropomorphize everything, so you see an object do that and you think “aggression,” or it goes away you think “shy” and then write onto it all these human emotions onto objects all the time, like we do all the time with things we see in nature.

This is something that does have to do with nature, it is just photographic abstracts of plants’ roots, trying to catch a ‘sensation’.



[Memories of Animate Being]

How did you get the roots out of the ground, did you photograph them all?

It was a creeper, a plant growing on a wall...

They look so much like they are floating in the ocean, like it's water.

Yes. This looks like jellyfish actually.

So you wrote me some of your art won a prize or something?

It was a prize of experimental film making, two years ago. The film titled “Vagabond Reality” was my first artwork about the deprivation tank. It was a 4-minutes film with a short narrative which also included some of the previous body-species animated.

It's on the web still?

There is an abstract on the web.

Below you can find links to short abstracts of 4 experimental films.

<http://www.youtube.com/user/gelyma>

A complicated discussion of the value of adding sounds to the animations is left out here.

Well I love the symptoms. And what you said about the symptoms and all of this about how it's a part of your shadow self, your digital self, but also a monster on its own. It is a very good linking of theory with your art, they did not seem so far apart.

This is an integral part of my research; as I get to understand the idea of the symptom, I realize more and more that experiencing digital space is a symptomatic situation (relative references in other contexts can be found in the field of psychoanalysis, or philosophy). The symptom is an expression of the digital self in the mechanistic form; in the computerized environment.

Now symptom does imply an illness or a defect. Did you mean to do this? With the monstrous?

No.

It's just a vocabulary for mapping?

Yes, it's just a vocabulary; because the symptom, when it stands on its own, does not imply any pathology. We all have symptoms. In different levels and in different combinations. It is only a constellation of symptoms that is pathological.

Only the constellation...

Yes, only a specific constellation. So we might find another constellation that has to do with the digital being, and maybe this is something else, something beyond pathology; but this is something that will emerge after some years of mature research.

Yes, and we all have symptoms, I keep forgetting that. And I shouldn't as I am so...symptom-full.

Birds Singing.

And where are we now, what is this place called?

This is Makrinitza?

The region of Pyorian hills? Pillio Mountain?

Pelion Mountain.

Where the centaurs lived? Monsters. Hopeful monsters!

Monsters, yes, there is a constellation of centaurs as well!

Afterword: There is a constellation of centaurs in more ways than one.

