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By Betti Marenko

After this summer's sci-art exhibition spree in London, Betti Marenko considers the possibilities for art to subvert techniques of science without being contaminated by them

'Sci-art' all-too often acts as a PR vehicle for science, at the expense of art. But what of true collaborations between artists and scientists that try to resist such instrumentalisation? Miria Swain surveys the scene

[IMAGE]

'It is necessary to explain that in those days there was the complete divorce in people's minds between aesthetic and mechanical considerations. First you made a thing, they thought, and then you decorated it. [...] If they made something frightful, then the artist was called in to sugar the pill'.¹

'[T]hose days' were supposed to be the future according to HG Wells, the godfather of science-fiction. So what of the relationship between art and science 70 years on from *The Shape of Things to Come*? Wells might not have thought that there was much future in it, but then he was not right with all his prophecies. London has not collapsed into the Thames quite yet. The last five years or so have seen an increase in attempts to marry art and science and as a result the emergence of a particular branch of the visual arts categorised as 'sci-art'. Like its semantic sibling sci-fi, sci-art exists in a post-enlightenment never-never land between science as rational and logical on the one hand and art as intuitive and emotional on the other. Unlike sci-fi though, what is commonly understood to be sci-art does not generally deal with dystopian visions of what the world might be like in the future (think Wells, Orwell, Huxley, Dick et al) or what science, in the wrong hands, is capable of (think Dr Moreau, Frankenstein, the Hulk... the list goes on).

Sci-art is instead a term commonly used to describe art projects which emerge from a perceived need to foster a better public understanding of science – as outlined in *Science and Art – Seeing Both Sides*, a Wellcome Trust News Supplement published last year. This 'sugar the pill' agenda of mediating scientific ideology through art has part of its legacy in a government education policy begun in the 1940s and '50s, aimed at countering adverse public opinion of science during the Cold War. Since then, funding programmes run by The Wellcome Trust, The Gulbenkian Foundation and The National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) among others, have been instrumental in reinforcing the art and science hybrid that is sci-art.

[IMAGE]

These science education and publicity driven patronage schemes find precedence in the marriage of art to religion, for centuries inseparable. Art was certainly deemed a successful tool in making religion more accessible to laymen, so in an age when science supersedes religion as a dominant doctrine, art can be used to the same end for science. Although using art as a communication vehicle for science accounts for the majority of so called sci-art projects, the orthodox view that the only viable position for art is one that is subordinate to science, overshadows many projects which attempt to advance the dialogue between artists and scientists.

This autumn saw the launch of *Experiment: Conversations in Art and Science*, published by The Wellcome Trust. This represents a short history of art and science collaborations and documents seven of the 32 projects presented under the umbrella of Wellcome's funding programme, 'Sciart'. These

range from mathematically enhanced juggling (Baby Epsilons) to the exploration of the effect on an audience of infecting a concert with infrasound (Soundless Music). One particular project Red and Wet on the Iron Air began life at the National Institute for Medical Research, a government funded research centre in North London, which has been supporting a contemporary art programme since 1998 [<http://art.nimr.mrc.ac.uk>]. In 1999, Zarina Bhimji was selected to be one of two artists-in-residence at NIMR. Over the course of 30 days, Bhimji took up a place within the department of Parasitology and so began a conversation with Dr Tony Holder that extended beyond the laboratories of Mill Hill to the red earth of Bhimji's native Uganda. The starting point for the project stemmed from a mutual interest in malaria and its carrier – the mosquito – Holder's area of research and the biggest killer in Africa. As the conversation developed, the project evolved into what Holder describes as an '[e]xploration of the spaces between laboratory and fieldwork, science and humanity.' The aim of Wellcome's sci-art programme has always been to support true collaborations between artists and scientists. From the outset Bhimji and Holder might have appeared to represent the model collaboration. Here was the scientist genuinely interested in how contemporary art practice might possibly interact with science. There, the artist interested in how science might provide a different perspective on her concerns as an artist – many of which are rooted in traumatic memories of Uganda under the despotic dictatorship of Idi Amin. In Experiment, the section on Red and Wet on the Iron Air features a text by Holder. Holder's essay describes the impact of social, political and economic factors on the spread of malaria, the science of the malaria parasite and his stake in the art and science collaboration. Missing from the section, however, is documentation of Bhimji's work and her involvement in the project. The images are photographs taken by the scientist. The artist is referenced, but silent, and the art is entirely missing from the sci-art. One cannot help wondering where the collaboration went and if, perhaps, there never was a true collaboration, just an extended conversation. In her introduction to the book, Bergit Arends reiterates that Bhimji and Holder's project was centred on research. She goes on to describe how research, by nature, does not always bring about conclusive outcomes and that it was the choice of the artist not to present work in progress. Holder and Bhimji's work may or may not conclude in the production of a work of sci-art, but the dialogue and time spent working through ideas will remain a valuable exchange. Holder gained an insight into the work of a contemporary artist, and the science may yet feed into Bhimji's work, albeit in an oblique and not obviously sci-art way. Consider Out of the Blue (2002), Bhimji's installation at Documenta XI and Art Now, Tate Britain, a visually powerful film picturing the scarred landscape of war-torn Uganda set against a soundtrack which includes the amplified hum of mosquitoes contrasted against the muffled sound of gunshots. In many ways the connections one might make in this work between political corruption, war, poverty and the mosquito as emblematic of disease, are not unlike Holder's concerns described in his chapter Red and Wet on the Iron Air.

[IMAGE]

[IMAGE]

The plan becomes art becomes the plan. With the work of Janice Kerbel, it is hard to know where the art stops and a good idea begins. Perhaps that is the point – the art is the good idea. Kerbel seduces us with the possibilities presented by her drawings, plans and instructions, regardless of the fact that most of them are just good ideas in theory. It is, after all, probably not a good idea to rob Coutts & Co on Lombard Street even though Kerbel's Bank Job (2000) might seem foolproof, and you certainly do not want to play poker with Kerbel unless you are in on her Three Marked Decks (1999) blag. As for The Bird Island Project (2000-03) – a dream island escape – if only it did exist.

As with many artists who adopt conceptual strategies, a frequent criticism of Kerbel's work (mainly from those outside the art world) is that, like a scientist or inventor, she sets up hypothetical what if scenarios and researches around the subject, but, unlike a scientist, that is usually where the project ends. Kerbel is not an empiricist and if she were to test her hypotheses her art might just turn into

science. A research residency Kerbel undertook at The Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research informed her latest project, Home Climate Gardens. The Tyndall Centre is a sort of environmental think-tank within which scientists work together with economists, engineers and social scientists to come up with sustainable solutions to climate change on a local and global scale.

Kerbel describes Home Climate Gardens as ‘a series of drawings and site specific installations that consider dystopic visions of the future alongside utopic dreams of landscape and architectural design.’ The series of drawings take the form of plans for gardens that are perfectly adapted to the climatic conditions of the built environment. The site specific installations, one might deduce, take the form of actual gardens designed, created and grown according to the precise indoor habitat in which the project is presented (whether a private home, a gym or an office, the possibilities are endless). With Home Climate Gardens, Kerbel might be testing her hypothesis, but the art has hardly become science in the process. As for the project’s relationship to research undertaken at the Tyndall Centre, at first it seems as if Kerbel is not concerned with finding a way to ‘advance the science of integration... to develop, demonstrate and apply new methodologies for integrating climate-change related knowledge,’ as one of the Tyndall Centre’s mission statements claims [<http://www.tyndall.ac.uk>]. But the more you think about the underlying socio-utopic dream proposed by Home Climate Gardens, the more you realise that, although Kerbel’s work may not be illustrating the latest thinking on how to deal with the effects of global warming, it is on some level dealing with climate change. Not change on a global or local scale, but on a domestic scale, in terms of the changed climates within which we find ourselves living and working. With Home Climate Gardens the art is not subordinated to the science, nor the science trivialised by the art. This is, in the main, due to two factors: Kerbel’s extensive experience of engaging with different areas of specialist knowledge and the inter-disciplinary context of the Tyndall Centre within which different perspectives, methodologies and thought processes are actively encouraged. In November 2003, as part of an exhibition of the Home Climate Gardens project, there might be a garden built, cultivated and installed in the Norwich Gallery according to its unique environment – might, because you never know whether Kerbel will actually go through with testing out her plans.

[IMAGE]

‘There are trivial truths and there are great truths. The opposite of a trivial truth is plainly false. The opposite of a great truth is also true.’ The Danish theoretical physicist Niels Bohr says his father was fond of this saying. Matthew Tickle tells me it explains chiasmus, a rhetorical device in which groups of words or ideas which express truth, when reversed in parallel to each other, can also be true. Chiasmus is the title of a work Tickle exhibited in a London show called Isonerv in May 2003. The work consisted of a Geiger counter attached to four photographer’s flash lamps. Every time the Geiger counter detected a radioactive particle one of the powerful flash lamps was activated, apparently at random. This work was the pilot for a larger project that Tickle has been developing for over two years with theoretical physicist Dr Fay Dowker who is based at Queen Mary College, University of London.

Most of empirical science relies on the notion that there is only one version of reality and one version of the truth. Scientists are not often ready to entertain the possibility that there might be more than one version of truth or reality; that truth in itself might be subjective. Quantum mechanics is one area of scientific enquiry which acknowledges some element of subjectivity. Dowker’s research interests lie in the area of quantum gravity, or to put it another way, she is interested in finding ways in which it might be possible to reconcile quantum theory and general relativity – the two cornerstones of theoretical physics. Dowker describes this as ‘high risk’ because she is researching at the point where science becomes ‘speculative’. In an interview Tickle explains to me that Dowker believes the universe exists outside of our ability to comprehend it. This takes the subjectivity of the quantum world one step further. The speculative nature of Dowker’s work inevitably involves the kind of

creative leaps of imagination that, as Thomas Khun suggested in his seminal 1962 text *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, occasionally bring about paradigm shifts in scientific thinking. It does not really come as a surprise then to learn that it was Dowker who initiated the project in the first place. Dowker, frustrated with orthodox attitudes within the scientific community, visited her local art gallery (Matt's Gallery) in search of a new kind of sounding board for her research and ideas. It is not obvious what Dowker hoped to get out of the project, if anything. Tickle says she is simply interested in learning more about how a contemporary artist and contemporary art work. He says curiosity was and remains Dowker's main motivation, and that she never stopped being the scientist and he never stopped being the artist. What the Eye Can't See the Heart Can't Grieve For, Tickle and Dowker's project, will be visible from the Mile End Road at Queen Mary College, University of London, after dark during February 2004. It will consist of about 100 photographer's flash lamps attached to about 100 Geiger counters positioned in various buildings, including the clock tower and the Physics building. One possible reading of the work might be to see it as making visible 'what the eye can't see' – such as radioactive particles in the atmosphere. The flashlights suggest the action of photography, which in turn implies that an event has been recorded as well as made visible, but the only image produced, however, the working practices of science and art. In *Science in Action* Bruno Latour, for example, proposed the idea that science – like art to a certain degree – is made by a network of corroboration within society. With this in mind, his idea of the 'Great Divide' between things that we know (science) and things that require some element of belief (art and Latour's idea of 'science in action') does not seem so great. Without such a gap to bridge, it is possible to envisage that art and science can enjoy a productive exchange of ideas, knowledge and imagination. An exchange between art and science might not always lead to fruitful collaborative projects, but it does at the very least promise a few more scientists with some interest or understanding of what lies beyond a laboratory. In 1945 George Orwell wrote an open letter to the *Tribune* entitled 'What Is Science?'. Responding to J Stewart Cook's suggestion that in order to avoid 'scientific hierarchy' the public would need to be scientifically educated, Orwell countered that some scientists might also benefit from a bit of education in the arts. In support of his argument Orwell refers to a contemporary example: '[A] number of British and American physicists refused from the start to do research on the atomic bomb, well knowing what use would be made of it. [...] And though no names were published ... it would be a safe guess that all of them were people with some kind of general cultural background some acquaintance with history or literature or the arts – in short, people whose interests were not, in the cultural sense of the word, purely scientific.'

So what is the shape of sci-art to come? Rather than sci-art, why not simply a case of science genuinely interested in art or art informed by science? Respect for the sci-art model certainly seems to have waned in recent years. Sci-art, it would seem, has become a victim, like sci-fi, of the institutional snobberies and intellectual elitism plaguing both art and science worlds. The idea that science and art can somehow meet on common ground – that scientists can speak the same language as artists and vice versa – often entails compromise and more often than not it is the art that gets compromised. Where art is subordinated to science, it does not challenge scientific hierarchy but reinforces it by suggesting that the only successful projects are those in which art becomes science. For these reasons few artists (and this undoubtedly includes Bhimji, Kerbel and Tickle) are comfortable with their work being described as sci-art. Sci-art as both a term and working model, is reductive, denying that our understanding of how contemporary artists and contemporary art works has moved on since the aesthetic frustration of the future as imagined by Wells.

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1 The Shape of Things to Come, HG Wells, 1932-3, pp. 359-60. All section titles in this article are taken from chapters in the fourth and fifth books

Picture Credits

Animated visualisation of the forthcoming public artwork What The Eye Can't See The Heart Can't Grieve For, Matthew Tickle and Fay Dowker

Home Climate Gardens, Janice Kerbel, 2003

Chiasmus, Matthew Tickle, 2003-4. Flash Units and Geiger Counter, dimensions variable. First shown at the exhibition Isonerv, London, April-May 2003. Organised by Michael Croft and Jonathan Hatt