Culture Biofiction: 

Imaginary Transgressions of Living Knowledge

Maria Manuela Lopes¹,²(*)

¹ Instituto de Biologia Molecular e Celular, i3S Instituto de Investigação e Inovação em Saúde, i3S, Universidade do Porto, Porto, Portugal
Maria.lopes@i3s.up.pt
² NIAM Núcleo de Investigação em Design Media e Cultura, Porto, Portugal

Abstract. Humans seem to have a transgressive and countercultural nature that no education or law can contain. In a time period when the technologies to preserve our memories and enhance our humane bodies are developing at a fast pace and the corresponding dystopic and utopic future scenarios are constantly presented in speculative ways the author reflects on her artistic practice informed by biotechnology and dwells on concepts of transgression, heterotopia, trans-disciplinarity and knowledge.

The influence of works of art on the ways of visualizing fundamental principles and beliefs, in the destruction and construction of skepticism and cynicism, is notorious. Art and culture are powerful on modifying and establishing the way in which policies, institutions and behaviour are presented, approved, criticized or condemned. The author’s personal practice focuses on specific areas of critical investigation, and on a continuous exercise seeking a reflective research hypothesis and an emerging methodology.

In a fictional way this paper departs from a visit to a Hieronymus Bosch painting, according to the author, an expression of counterculture/subculture in a cultural landmark and follows to enquiry on whether memory and the author arts-based research practice on memory are transgressive. This research practice/reflexion aims to contribute to the empowerment of art as a form of knowledge.

Keywords: Arts-based research · Memory · Transgression

1 Introduction

When the triptych of Hieronymus Bosch, The Garden of Earthly Delights (c. 1480–1505, oil on panel, 220 × 390 cm in Museum Prado) is in the closed position it looks like a quasi-monochromatic perfect sphere—a vision of a planet-shaped clear glass vessel half-filled with water, interpreted to be either the depiction of the Flood, or the beginning of the Divine creation of the world, which has to do with the springing forth of flowers, plants and trees. It all changes with the inner panels’ provocation, as the triptych presents a path towards temptation and vice. The outer panels may therefore be intended to provoke a meditative invitation towards transgression.

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The first panel depicts God, looking like a mad scientist in a landscape animated by vaguely alchemical vials and of course Adam and Eve. Although they are located in the center foreground, in scale Adam and Eve—as well as God—are apparently as important as the other creatures in this paradise. In the painted garden there’s little to differentiate man from animals from plants - elephants, giraffes, unicorns and other hybrid animals, along with birds, fish, aquatic creations, snakes, insects and plants are all given the same importance.

Bosh was the master of biofiction and represented many subcultures (even imaginary) in its paintings); maybe Bosh was commenting on the cellular, particle and atomic nature of matter that comes together for a time, holding a form and a sensible being and, when it perishes, those atoms return to their origins to reconfigure in some other form. This transgressive power of eternal becoming is the nature of the world and nature, and we are all nature.

2 Werk als Transgression

Transgression fuses arts, language and performance (praxis and poiesis) and emphasizes notions of freedom and out of borders. It embraces intertextual practices and celebrate the interface between, and flux within, linguistic, corporeal, interdisciplinary and technological praxis, serving to support art practice and collaboration as a new form of aesthetic. The author [1] arts practice/research has drawn on diverse theories and praxis for a continual disruption of formal conventions in favor of playfully unsettling of conventional propositions, which causes the receivers of the artistic work to be drawn into an unconscious communicative process. The author attempts to imply a biological, sensual disturbance using appropriation and ethnographic exploration within aesthetic appreciation to produce an affective reading. Thus, some kind of transgressive mode of thinking and practice emerge from the center and margins of her art practice.

The author, has been working as an artist within scientific laboratories for more than a decade and, claims [2] that scientific Laboratories are heterotopic places – submerged environments confined by sets of rules, protocols, controlled behavior (even materials that build the space are pre planned to a certain grid of behavior.

Both reflections and practice work focus on the following research questions:

How may the artworks contribute to the display of autobiographical memory discourse, via exploring the representational practices and techniques circulating on scientific research into memory related areas?

How is memory and the author’s practice related to transgression?

How have artists critically approached this permission to observe, enact and construct the movement (physical or symbolic) from laboratory to studio?

Reflecting on the idea of ‘looking at’ in institutions, French philosopher Michel Foucault explores the ways in which institutions such as schools, prisons, hospitals or asylums depend on several forms of surveillance. In his 1967 lecture ‘On Other Spaces’ he identified specific types of spaces that have links to all other sites in our culture, but in a way that contradicts or reflects the set of relations they designate. Places such as
cemeteries, theatres and museums are termed ‘heterotopias’, and this metaphor has been used to describe a network of archival spaces that form some of the author’s artworks for recognized similarity of principles.

Foucault [3] views ‘crisis heterotopias’ as places reserved for individuals in a state of crisis with respect to society and the human milieu though he refers to transitory crisis such as adolescence, citing examples such as educational experience or military service. This characteristic corresponds broadly to two of the authors’ archival spaces because of their association with a state of crisis. Another principle refers to connections and relations simultaneously juxtaposed and previously non-existing, exemplified by the way in which theatre and cinema provide symbolic meanings. In the authors’ arts-based research these correspond to the studio, where montage and reconstructions are actuated, and new connections forged.

An additional principle presupposes a system of opening and closing, isolating heterotopias and thus at the same time rendering them penetrable, either through coercion, as in imprisonment, or via rituals and purifications. The author ascribes a similarity with scientific laboratories, as places that are only accessible with special permission obtained by following bureaucratic and aseptic procedures. The processes of filling in various consents, contracts, health and safety or ethics forms, in addition to procedures such as donning white coats and cleansing of hands, are seen to equate to ritualistic and purification performances (today, in the pandemic scenario the world is facing, the public space becomes heterotopic).

Foucault defined the notion of heterotopias, ‘other spaces’ in which limits are contested [3]. These counter-sites contain the possibility of new discoveries and strategies that elude or evade the dominant panoptic gaze. Heterotopias are located at the limits of one episteme and the beginning of another and are thus perhaps at the edge of art practice and scientific and medical research. They push knowledge to the limits of that which can be thought or said. They may be understood as spaces that subvert the dominant spatio-visual ordering and distribution of bodies in space, re-conceiving space as that which is ‘not fixed’ or ‘immobile’. Emphasis is thus placed on the situation of lived, embodied spaces. An aspect considered in the author’s arts-based research is a conceptualization of heterotopic principles, creating ideas about spaces beyond existing spaces, and allowing recognizable similarities to be associated with the fiction archival spaces, which are to be considered heterotopias.

2.1 But What Is Transgression?

As Bosh proposed in The Garden of Earthly Delights, reality may be worse than imagination. When we watch the news or read a report we are confronted with scary information on how many people die due to COVID 19 or hunger; how the social distance between rich and poor is increasing, or with regard to human rights, for example, incidents increase to the point of exclusion. The world’s population has increased but the death toll in bio or economic wars has increased much more and in the last half of the twentieth century the world lost one third of its forest cover and a large portion of a natural balance (e.g. coral riff versus icebergs); Despite the growing existence of gadgets and mobile phones or computers per individual, many populations still do not have electricity or potable water. It seems no law can save us from our own
transgressive and countercultural nature. Man needs laws to survive in community, but notions of good or evil are blur and still subjective today. There is a continuous panorama of world order or disorder, and it is this panorama that must be approached or tackled to acquire the notion of normativity in force.

As any media spectator can affirm, and based on several examples, that everything is possible today, since all is allowed because everything seems to happen. Events are taken as facts. Fact that, by acquiring existence is your own permission to life. In Bosh paintings it was the middle ages, and monsters were everywhere. In the biotech laboratory biofiction is allowed and the author still feels present the same tension between living and non-living entities!

Normativity, based on this volatile scheme, happens to be transgression itself. In the same way, transgression implies normativity. We can assume from the assumption that today there is no normativity or that everything is considered behaviour belonging to the norm. Transgressive inefficiency, or its saturation, render it impotent. The arts have been transgressive since its birth, appearing absent from canonical pillars or regulatory aesthetics. The influence of works of art on the ways of visualizing fundamental principles and beliefs, in the destruction and construction of scepticism and cynicism, is notorious. Art is powerful of modifying and establishing the way in which policies, institutions and behaviour are presented, approved, criticized or condemned.

Since it appears, we are living in a contemporary hybridism that values each individual’s individuality, radical oppositions have become less clear and operational. This is process that can relativize any event, which leads to a visualization of the human body as a biotechnical image, in the organic becoming of a hybrid transgressive entity, a machine or a cyborg. The possibility of transgression, but mainly of shock, may cease to exist due to the paradigms inserted by the human being, that constitutes their own limited universe of possibilities.

As proposed in Human Enhancement (a thematic area the author has explored in her research for a few years [4] transgression is continuous and present in all actions because the value that has been entrusted in society is to break with the rules and not to compromise, to break the bonds and to be capable of any change, in accordance with the Darwinian principle that those who survive is who best fits. An individual skilled with machine elements, a biotechnical state, is probably more likely to survive, compared to an individual with a traditional family, children, and routine employment

– this can hardly be adjusted with the same speed as that on which no one depends.

Enhancement becomes the norm, the “normal” becomes the tabu. Thus, the author wonders where the context for evolution might be.

As the artwork “Metaphorical Evolution” (Fig. 1) presented in Espacios de Especies at Centro de Cultura Digital in Mexico City, proposes: Can a newly invented concept operate on its own, without a context? In organic terms: can a newly conceived organism (a biofiction) survive on its own, without the environment? The interdependence is not simply complementary, one is not merely the opposite of the other, but rather a heterogeneous amalgam of one and the other.

The introduction to Henry Bergson’s book “Creative Evolution” contains a daring statement that equates comprehension of life with comprehension of knowledge: “theory of knowledge and theory of life seem to us inseparable” [5]. From “the perfect
fitting of our body to its environment” Bergson [6] demonstrates how intellect evolved for the purpose “to think matter,” and yet intellect is only one strand of evolution:

[…] the line of evolution that ends in man is not the only one. On other paths, divergent from it, other forms of consciousness have been developed, which have not been able to free themselves from external constraints or to regain control over themselves, as the human intellect has done, but which, none the less, also express something that is immanent and essential in the evolutionary movement. Suppose these other forms of consciousness brought together and amalgamated with intellect: would not the result be a consciousness as wide as life? And such a consciousness, turning around suddenly against the push of life which it feels behind, would have a vision of life complete […] [7].

Taken from this standpoint, all potential forms of awareness are immanent in evolution and would therefore, if operating in unison, be able to grasp life immediately. Since the mid-seventeenth century, the European Enlightenment Story of Science has celebrated scientific heroism, especially its objectivity and rationalism, its progress in improving human reason and conquering the unknown. The story has been critiqued in our time as reductionist. The author wonders whether culture and human intellect can reconnect with other modes of awareness. Humanity participates in an evolving universal consciousness through our embodied interaction and cooperative interdependence within embedded, self-producing (autopoietic) systems, from the micro- to the macroscopic.
3 Final Thoughts on Memory Art and Transgression

The authors’ art projects reflect on memory and contemporary environmentalist and cooperation values seeking to promote increased value for and sensitivity to the natural world and an awareness of our potential for choosing positive outcomes for the biosphere as a whole.

As several authors have proposed [8, 9] humans are not the perfected evolution proof, rather evolution incorporates humanity as an emergent system within the autopoetic layers of the universe.

Knowledge needs to be an open structure, as the “Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity” requires and demands [10]. The living knowledge does not oppose the traditional forms of knowledge, in fact, it builds upon them or rather metabolizes them into its own internal or external by-products. The scope of transdisciplinarity evolved into an organism of living knowledge is therefore not to increase the number of disciplines or to enlarge the volume of disciplinary domains, but to intensify the zone in between and beyond the disciplines.

One cannot live the knowledge by being separated from it through artificial division in the observer and the observed. By experience, my work practice has brought me to conclude that transdisciplinarity is complementary to disciplinarity, once stepping outside the borders of one’s main discipline getting into a transdisciplinary zone is not a one way trip and when the work is shown in a museum/gallery context I regain my role as a disciplinary researcher.

But how can the author consider her work as transgressive? Transgression is defined usually by overcoming the limits and barriers established by a law or a set of principles. Transgressing is not only overcoming a limit, but much more recognizing it. The fact of violating a barrier evidences its presence and existence. Transgression reinforces the wall of law that it itself destroys, thus becoming a joint act of denial and affirmation. Transgression may be understood as a condition of both established and emerging norms as well as of all kinds of identities and normality’s.

Transgression however runs much wider and deeper than that. It is [11] not merely the breaking of a code, a rebellion against normative social or cultural constraints; rather it is part of our selves and identities, and we would have no sense of our own subjectivity were it not for a constant, if discontinuous negotiation with the transgressive otherness by which we are formed and informed. Identity needs to believe in its own stability for the conventions of transgression to apply.

Accordingly [12] definitions of transgression have to do with

1 form or identity/self;
2 a movement or motion, a passage of some kind, and therefore implicitly a duration or temporality; and this passage from being on the side of the law to being lawless, for example, hence trespass, to pass over or across, to infringe or impose;
3 spatial and relational position or location.

In the sense that transgression is always a motion that disturbs borders and the understanding of what is included and excluded by any boundary, [11] argues than that “memory is transgressive”.


Memory may be voluntary or involuntary and can arrive at any time. Equally, unbidden, it slips or fades away. In either case, memory [15] implies the movement across a certain limit, boundary or margin. Memory moves across several thresholds and ‘places’; between for example, the unconscious and the conscious mind, between remembering and forgetting. Further memory is performative and experiential and thus moves as a recording of the past from the moment of its reenactment and reshaping to the moment of its reiteration. In this route, memory [16] crosses the boundary not between a past and a present, that is to say the past of an experience or event recorded by the mind or the present of that mind’s recollection of the event or experience through the inscribed or recorded trace of the thing itself. Memory, through its qualities, trespasses the border between real and fiction, between the trace of a material condition and its materiality.

However, to remain with memory’s passage, in this motion, memory is transgressive in another fashion, for in its movement it undoes any neat distinction between truth and falsity. Like the authors’ own art works about memory, memory itself, tells fictions in a manner that it becomes neither simply true nor false. Indeed, the very categories themselves of truth or falsity, real or fiction, are shown to be marked by limits that memory can and does overstep – therefore transgress. In creative terms, the major conclusions of this ongoing research are the development of several novel methods of research, the resulting artefacts, and the practical materialization of these via the agency of installation. Overall, they are infused with qualities such as the temporal, the invisible, the archive and the creative re-enacting character of biological cognitive processes and scientific strategies. This is suggested as a fertile area for new art-based explorations and critiques of developments in both contemporary art and science.

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