

Interviews with Renewable Network artists by Rasa Šmite

Interview with Erik Sjödin

October 11, 2010 (via e-mail)

Q1. What was your motivation to start your projects (Suitcase Science, Bush-scopes, Stem Sounds and now – Super Meal) in the field of bio+technology?

A. Suitcase Science, Bush-scopes and Stem Sounds are part of Strange Eden, a loose umbrella for various work relating to art, nature and technology that were carried out at the Interactive Institute's Art & Technology Program between 2008 and 2009. What motivated me to pursue Strange Eden was a lack of meaning, just experimenting with art and technology, which is what we were doing at the time, wasn't enough. I felt that we didn't understand how what we were doing fitted into a larger context, that we didn't understand why we were doing what we were doing, and I thought that working with "nature" somehow could provide a sense of meaning. So I was looking for a way to pour "nature" into the soup of art and technology that I already had going. We never got very far and in 2009 the Art & Technology Program closed, but it was nevertheless a start of something. I should emphasize that Strange Eden was a collaboration and I'm sure others had other motifs for pursuing this line of inquiry.

Super Meal is still an ongoing project so it is a bit too early to analyze it retrospectively. I intend to put together and publish an Azolla cookbook and cultivation manual in the near future, in the book I'll also attempt to place the project in a larger context, in the context of present and in a historical context. It is for example interesting how the project relates to the New Alchemy Institute's work in the 1970s which I discovered while I was doing research for the project. What I've really been doing the past year is transitioning from working with technical instrumentalities, on the surface of things, to working with philosophical questions, such as the notion of nature, and I hope to get some of this thinking into the publication.

Q2. How would you yourself describe your interest to work in interdisciplinary field of biotechnology – fusing art and science, nature and technology?

Perhaps the first thing you realize when you start cogitating on the notion of nature, the idea of nature, is that there is a widespread view that nature is something outside of us, that we are in nature and not part of nature. When we deconstruct this idea and other ideas we have about nature we realize that everything is connected, that

everything is interdependent and then to work interdisciplinary or not becomes a non-issue. I don't know how to not work interdisciplinary.

Is it experimentation with new art forms?

The only art form I'm interested in is the one that gives me freedom to pursue my own line of inquiry.

Is it social action?

I attempt to change myself and the environment I'm in and I imagine that by doing so I'm contributing to a better society, but perhaps I'm doing both myself and society what we in Sweden call a "bear's service", a well intentioned service that has a negative effect on the recipient. The expression stems from a French fable by La Fontaine, about a bear and a gardener, in which a tame bear smacks a fly on his sleeping master's face and accidentally kills him.

.. Or is it artistic research into the fields of science?

I do research in a sense that I venture into areas that are unknown to me, in search of knowledge that is new to me. I can't claim to do research in the sense of looking for entirely new domains of knowledge, in the sense of treading where no-one has tread before. It takes time to get to new territories and I've just set out.

Q3. Do you consider that your projects, your approach may provide an alternative perspective on how to deal with sustainability issues (such as alternative and green energy)?

I haven't been working with alternative and green energy directly but Super Meal and to some extent the Strange Eden projects do indirectly deal with this and other sustainability issues. Working with these projects has changed my own perspectives on sustainability and I think I am starting to form an alternative understanding of what it means. I don't think that these projects communicate these perspectives though. On the contrary, I think they might reaffirm a lot of illusions. I hope that people looking at these projects don't take them as affirmations of whatever it is that they are doing.

Q4. Do you think your activities may have an impact outside of arts community (to other people, local communities, society)?

I think my activities primarily have an impact on me and on people I know and meet. It might sound like I'm trivializing my work but I don't think you should underestimate this impact. It's important to realize that whatever you do it does have an impact. Living without having an impact is an achievement, just by existing you affect your environment and the effects might be far greater than you realize.

Interview with Bartaku (Bart Vandeput)

October 14, 2010 (via e-mail)

Q1. What was your motivation to start your research project "PhoEf" and to learn how to build dye sensitized solar cells?

q1_a / Presumably three observations made me start PhoEf. After having explored the energies and aesthetics of overtorsed threads, the amazement over the "wild" use of electricity and batteries from sea level to 5500 m, by people in Kinshasa, connecting vertical electric wires to the horizontal main power lines to have a small power shop selling to the local quartier, pending on the ground that create big electrocution fields when the rains pour down and convert in no time the streets into wild waters, killing dozens of people that try to wade home barefooted in the dark, and thirdly, the observation of a solar powered water pump highly responsive to the shade of the hand above the solar panel, sold by a Chinese man with his daughter in a Confucian stand in the outdoor path between the big halls of the big solar fair with fancy highly illuminated corporate stands with high pitched voices of sun tanned boys and girls.

q1_b / One aspect of "PhoEf" was the mapping of the existing and future photovoltaic technologies. The most intriguing one is the dye sensitized solar cell, on one hand because it approaches the natural process of light-to-energy conversion the most, and on the other hand because it is simple technology, allowing people from 8–88 to experiment with shape, pattern, color and text. Like the traditional fruit battery it generates little energy for a short time, but as opposed to the contaminated fruits, you can re-use most of the components and drink the edible left-over dyes. Moreover, the dssc reveals a "temporary digestopia", since it envisages the idea of edible solar cells, entering the domain of cradle to cradle and fundamental systems thinking, with some help from the Indian and molecular cuisine.

Erik Sjödin's artistic practice is a visual and participative approach to cogitating on the notion of nature and on various interdependencies and interrelationships between humans and their environment. He is particularly interested in how we use technology as means to manipulate our environment, how we satisfy basic human needs, such as our need for water, food, shelter and energy and how our understanding of ourselves in relation to our environment affects how we construct the world around us. Applied science often plays an integral part in his works and he carries out comprehensive research in areas spanning from living organisms and systems to technology.

Q.2 How would you yourself describe your interest to work in an interdisciplinary field – fusing art, science and technology? Is it experimentation with new art forms, or is it social action?

q2_a / Safe to say, that until the time of nailing these words down, it just seemed to be my natural habitat. It provides ingredients for adventure and exploration and many invitations for fact based fiction.

q2_b / It might be about one, and not the other, the other and not the one. It might be about both at the same time, or not at the same time, but at the same place. It might be about both at the same place, or not at the same place, but at the same time. It might be about something else.

Q3. Do you consider that your projects, your approach may provide an alternative perspective on how to deal with sustainability issues (such as alternative and green energy)? Do you think your activities may have an impact outside of arts community (to other people, local communities, society)?

q3_a / If this is the case, it is most welcome, but the risk is substantial – that this perspective will be very persistent.

q3_b / I facilitate workshops both locally and international that are attended by artists, engineers, chemists, historians, future textile designers, and children, with participants originating from all the continents.

See biography on page 173.