

FUTURE



conversation with **STINE DEJA**
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Suspended Vision, Billboard, 3D animation, Variable dimensions, EXPO Chicago Override, Chicago, United States, 2019.

MARCO GALVAN *in conversation with*
STINE DEJA

MG

When did you become interested in art?

SD

It was a long process. My parents have always been very creative and would always encourage me to use my imagination and express myself in various ways. When I was around twelve, I really enjoyed attending a film course at school, where we had to come up with an idea for a short film, then film and edit within a short timeframe. It was such a relief for me to find something that I deeply enjoyed doing. Then, later in my life I was at the hospital for a really long time, and at some point I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life and that's when I realised that doing art was my path.

MG

How did you move towards the investigation of technology and the relationship between the human and the technological? What is your artistic practice and research?

SD

I am really interested in people and how we change because of technology and the opportunities that technology brings. I think of my work as a kind of anthropological investigation and a reflection on how much the world we live in has changed as a result of technology, over a relatively short period of time. I think it's important to keep questioning ourselves, myself included, on how we constantly accept all of these technological steps without considering where it's going to end up someday, and what the destination will look like. For this reason, I like to explore these scenarios through art, because art can really ask all types of questions without any judgement, and put the questions out there into the world. This is not a matter of thinking whether technology is bad or good. I believe it's healthy to stay engaged with how our lives are changing and shifting.

MG

Was there something that prompted you towards this type of research or did it happen spontaneously?

SD

I think it was because I could feel it was starting to become a relevant part of my own life and in that sense I would say it happened very naturally. When I made the *Perfect Human* video piece in 2014, I was inspired by Jørgen Leth, a Danish film-maker who also made a piece, in 1967 called *Perfect Human* in which he investigates what it is like to be human. I feel particularly close to this film as it is one of the first films that I was introduced to when I was at school and it is such a stringent display of movie making. That's how I decided I wanted to research and try to show what it meant to be human in 2014. I think it is the first piece where I was really considering technology and humans. Then, I guess that broad theme has been a part of every project since.

MG

"Cyphoria", your first solo show at Annka Kultys Gallery, consisted of a large projection, alongside an immersive

installation evoking the sense of an airport departure lounge for a cyber-traveller. How did you meet Annka Kultys and how did this collaboration start?

SD

This is a funny story, actually. On LinkedIn, Annka used to send me invitations to openings at her gallery. I used to live three minutes away from it, and I went to see some of the shows. In the same period that year, I met up with Marie Munk and we were discussing the possibility of creating something together and doing an exhibition. We were brainstorming about our future show together and that's when I thought it might be a nice idea to reach out to Annka. I said to her I was planning to do a project with Marie and I sent her my portfolio. She invited me to the gallery and I was positively surprised to realise she already knew my work very well, even some lines of my videos as she had been watching them repeatedly.

MG

It's fascinating and encouraging to see how much other people are committed to your art and believe in you...

SD

It was a little bit of a lucky chance as well, I guess. She proposed that I have a solo show at the gallery and two months later "Cyphoria" opened. Later, Marie and I also had the show that we had originally contacted her about.

MG

In your new works you are exploring in even greater depth the relationship between humans and technology. Regarding your show "There's Life Outside", how did you get the idea of starting to represent how increasingly the world is becoming artificial?

SD

The piece *There's Life Outside*, from 2015, was originally developed for a show with the theme and title "green". I was interested in how "green" was tied up inextricably with environmental issues and the idea of embracing nature and making healthy life choices. Then, I saw this life-drink made by Coca-Cola sold in a green can and I thought it



“Cyphoria”, Exhibition view,
Annka Kultys Gallery, London, United Kingdom, 2017.



“Cyphoria”, Exhibition view,
Annka Kultys Gallery, London, United Kingdom, 2017.



There's Life Outside, Coca Cola Life cans, curtains, stainless steel rails,
197 × 158 × 20 cm, 2015.

was an interesting way to present how the concept of green has been commercialised. For this show at Annka Kultys's Gallery, I made an installation that featured a generic living room where the outdoor view was obscured by Coca-Cola life-cans piled up in front of the "window". The label claimed they had been sweetened by "natural sources", highlighting the irony and contradictions of our increasingly artificial world. Moreover, while I was making this piece, I started noticing how companies and firms claim that their brands have a strong and intimate bond with nature. For example, I remember the Apple store in Oxford Street suddenly shut down and when they re-opened they had real trees installed inside.

So, being someone who has a bit of addiction to drinking soft drinks, the reflection on this topic felt even closer and discovering the Coca-Cola Life product made me realise that probably it's the most unnatural thing you can put in your body. I guess my point was that real life happens outside.

MG

It's interesting that you are mentioning the Apple Store trees. They created a simulated space to make it look more familiar to people, in a similar way you did in some of your shows. How did you get the idea for "Synthetic Seduction" and also why the title?

SD

Marie Munk contacted me just after finishing her MA about a potential collaboration. I loved her work, so we started brainstorming. For the title, we were thinking about how new technologies are very seductive, whether it's a phone or a robot, it has a certain level of attraction. We probably went through around three hundred titles, and in the end we decided to go for "Synthetic Seduction".

MG

When I came to your studio we were discussing the book *Digital Stockholm Syndrome in the Post-Ontological Age* by Mark Jarzombek. It's somehow related to that...



“Synthetic Seduction”, Exhibition view, A collaboration between Stine Deja and Marie Munk, Annka Kultys Gallery, London, United Kingdom, 2018.



“Synthetic Seduction”, Exhibition view, A collaboration between Stine Deja and Marie Munk, KH7 Artspace, Aarhus, Denmark, 2018.



“Synthetic Seduction”, Exhibition view, A collaboration between Stine Deja and Marie Munk, Annka Kultys Gallery, London, United Kingdom, 2018. **12**

SD

Actually, it is related to that, although I only discovered that book this year. We were both reading Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together* and we were interested in how intimacy has changed and what the possibilities are for intimacy with technology. For the show, we wanted to create a very specific atmosphere, so we imagined the space as a futuristic laboratory and we used blue curtains to give people the right context to approach the work. By using a very familiar context we wanted the public to have the impression of stepping into a medical establishment, but it was nothing like the hospital that people know.

MG

Was it the first time for you to collaborate with another artist?

SD

No, I have always enjoyed doing collaborations. I think it's a good way to verbalise your ideas and take them further than you would do on your own. It's also nice to have someone to share the experience with, like researching, travelling, setting up and enjoying the success or failures of the show together.

MG

Can you talk about *HYPERSEA*, the permanent installation commissioned by The Danish Art Foundation?

SD

In 2018, I was contacted by the Danish Art Foundation as they wanted me to pitch an installation idea for a new public sports centre just outside Copenhagen. They wanted me to present a project for 23 changing rooms. The idea had to take up as little space as possible, be extremely functional but it also had to speak to a younger crowd of people who might feel uncomfortable undressing in a public space. I started thinking about what could bind these rooms together, both in relation to use of the changing rooms and to the environment around the building. The one thing that seemed to make sense was water. There was water in the nearby fjord, an artificial lake outside,



Hypersea, Stainless steel reliefs, ceiling sound installation, channel grates, ocean blue walls, Variable dimensions, Commissioned by the Danish Arts Foundations and Holbæk Kommune, Holbæk Sportsby, Holbæk, Denmark, 2019. Photographer: I DO ART Agency.



Hypersea, Stainless steel reliefs, ceiling sound installation, channel grates, ocean blue walls, Variable dimensions, Commissioned by the Danish Arts Foundations and Holbaek Kommune, Holbaek Sportsby, Holbæk, Danemark, 2019. Photographer: I DO ART Agency.

but also water flowing out the taps, through the toilets, as well as it filling the swimming pools. All human lives begin in water, the world is covered by 71% water, our bodies contain around 80% water too. We are all made of water, so the theme became clear.

I had also read a book by Astrida Neimanis for another water-related project, *Bodies of Water*, about post-human feminism and I attended one of her talks in London; I told her about my project and I asked her if I could use a few sentences from her book for the drains in the changing rooms. My idea was that people could read the simple phrase “we are all bodies of water” while standing naked being showered in water. All the rooms are monochrome, the colour is called “Ocean Blue”, and there are sound installations hidden in the ceiling that use field recordings from the fjord nearby. I installed still-life pieces that display humans in a foetal position, all made with different techniques so they all look different but using the exact same basic shapes. The message that I wanted to convey with this project is that even though we might look different, we are all very much the same.

I do really like this work. It was my first time making a permanent, public installation. It was very interesting making art for such a functional, intimate space, with so many limitations and opportunities at the same time.

MG

SD

What about *Hard Core, Soft Bodies*?

It was Bob Bicknell-Knight who was curating a project for an online platform and he asked me to create some work. So I started working with 3d illustration. At the beginning, *Hard Core, Soft Bodies* was intended for print. Then it became videos, and now my dream is to create large human-sized sculptures. Basically, the idea behind

these works was to reimagine and reconstruct human shapes combining biological organs and technological prosthetics. These objects make subtle movements and emit familiar sounds as a tribute to the human body and the possibilities for technology to further expand its potential.

MG

Do you think about how your artworks relate and connect with the audience and the public? And to what extent would you like the public to interact with it and what would you like to make them think about?

SD

I would say 100% yes, because I am not an artist who makes work for myself only, my work needs an audience to be “activated”. I have to think about the viewing experience when I plan my installations, hence why I often choose familiar places to tell unfamiliar stories. I have to go through many stages of imagining what people would see.

MG

For example, with *Thermal Womb* were you trying to let the audience know about the existence of cryopreservation? Were you trying to make the public aware of the existence of this technology and to make them think about how far we are now intertwining ourselves with technology?

SD

To some extent I was trying to shine a light on it for the audience, but perhaps even a bigger light on the possible future it represents. To me it is interesting that this technology, which can potentially alter human life altogether, exists without it being that big a deal. It doesn't get much funding, and that's probably why they haven't had any big breakthroughs. At the same time, similar treatments in other stages of life get loads of funding and are widely accepted. This duality is something I love exploring.

MG

How did you get interested in cryopreservation and transhumanism? How did your artistic research lead to this?

SD

Two years ago, I was doing research and I found a video on YouTube of this guy called Zoltan



Hard Core, Soft Bodies, 3D animation, TV, gravel and tv mount, 9 min 16 s, 2019.
Photographer: David Stjernhold.



“Hard Core, Soft Bodies”, Exhibition view, Schimmel Projects,
Dresden, Germany, 2018.

Istvan who was running for president in America and campaigning around the U.S., driving in a coffin-shaped bus, visiting various transhumanism organisations. From that moment, this topic started to be part of my research and I wanted to deepen my knowledge about it. In 2018, I went to San Francisco to do some more research and I applied for an artistic residency at SPACE that permitted me to develop my work further. I think this particular interest is driven by things I have found online, by my own huge anxiety about death and by the fact that death is such a taboo—it's always interesting to work with taboos.

MG

Do you think that technology and art could work together to benefit society?

SD

During lockdown, I think we have seen a beautiful collaboration between the two. People are finding other ways of showing works and galleries are doing interactive walk-throughs. Artists, curators and thinkers are doing Instagram live sessions for the public to join. During times of physical distancing, technology is keeping us together but I'm definitely not talking about choosing either one or the other. And if I had to, I would choose physical spaces and "real" intimacy any day. But I also think that 2020 is showing us that a lot of culture can happen online as well.

MG

I think that online-based platforms can work and start collaborations with physically based spaces and galleries and promote an artist both online and offline.

Considering you work *4K Zen* and the fact that every work you do makes you go more and more in depth and your idea of well being related to cryopreservation, do you think that cryopreservation is actually well being?

SD

For some people it might be well being, knowing that there is a chance of coming back at a later point. This specific and quite expensive knowledge might help them live a better life in the present.

In my work, I try to stay open to the topics I focus on, I want to be able to look at it from the outside and ask relevant questions.

At some point, I started making judgments about cryonics, but I realised that in many other aspects of the medical industry they also use cryopreservation methods, for example to freeze embryos or organs. I had a child myself thanks to this technological development, so I need to stay open-minded and see where all of this is going.

MG

Would you say that your art offers the mediums to better understand the digitalised society?

SD

I have recently watched an interview with a Physicist and futurist Michio Kaku on YouTube talking about the existence of other dimensions, and he used the analogy of a fish in a pond to explain his theory. He explains that if you are a fish living in water you don't really consider there might be something above the surface. But if the fish sees what is above, what kind of conversations would this fish start when it goes back to the fish world? He was using this analogy to explain string theory, something far more complex than I can comprehend, but I still loved the picture he painted. I thought it's a bit like what I am trying to achieve with my work: to create possible futures through my research and shine a light on things that already or might exist, inviting people to engage with these scenarios.

MG

Is there a component of existentialism in your work? Especially regarding your work *Hyper Functional, Ultra Healthy* that you presented at Somerset House in London, in which you imagine society as completely extinct and transformed into something new. What would you think would happen if human existence had no meaning, everything we do is completely pointless and all communication didn't exist anymore?

SD

I definitely believe that we all have to create our own purpose and with the piece for Somerset House I wanted to offer the viewers a different lens for seeing the world we live in right now. I was looking at something really mundane that we, as humans, spend a lot of time doing: for example, going to the gym.

Then I projected this behaviour into the future where a future society may interpret the objects in a completely different way because they view the world based on their own experiences.

The meaning of the gym could get lost to the point that it becomes surreal.

MG

How important do you think it's for an artist today to be able to produce their own work?

SD

There are so many different types of art out there and they all have a place in the world, no matter who produces them. Speaking for myself, I don't think there's only one way. I always have, up until recently, been doing everything myself, partly because I enjoy it but also because I was on some sort of budget. Then when I was doing *Hypersea*, I had to let go of some of my control and collaborate with the builders on executing my idea. That made me realise how clear and precise you need to be when handing over the work, and there's a great lesson in that too.

I do believe that if you know your craft really well you are more likely to experiment and break the rules. The freedom might just be somewhere within these limitations.

As mentioned, it also comes down to budgets. If the idea is good, it will probably be a good piece of art, regardless of the production process. That's my philosophy, I make sure I really like my idea and let it unfold the way it needs to.

MG

SD

How are you spending your days during this quarantine?
Luckily my studio is approximately twenty steps from my front door, so I'm trying to go there every day because that keeps me sane. I have been trying to maintain some kind of routine, figure out some new works and applying for funding.

MG

SD

What are you working on at the moment and do you have any upcoming shows?

I am really excited about an upcoming group show at König Gallery in Berlin, where I will show one of my *Thermal Womb* pieces. I also have a solo show coming up at Tranen in Denmark. There's still plenty of stuff to figure out, so that will keep me busy this summer.



Thermal Womb, Aluminium structure, sleeping bag, ratchet straps, screen,
3D animation, 200 × 55 × 45 cm, 2019.



“Last Resort”, Exhibition view, Annka Kultys Gallery,
London, United Kingdom, 2020.



Thermal Suspension (detail), Sleeping bag, chromed steel frame, ratchet straps,
220 × 138 × 10 cm, 2019.

Stine Deja, Figure Figure 2020
Courtesy of the artist

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