

Sociología y tecnociencia/Sociology and Technoscience: Special Issue: Artefacts

ARTIFACTS. BACK TO HUMANITY

ARTEFACTOS. DE VUELTA A LA HUMANIDAD

DAVID CASADO-NEIRA

Universidade de Vigo – University of Vigo

dcneira@uvigo.es

Objects, gadgets, instruments, tools, utensils, machines – all refer to the use of a device for transforming reality. Ars+factus, skill+made, in this conjunction the artifact (whether virtual, cultural, social, archeological, biotechnical, political...) is inherent to the very definition of what is human. Just like language, the artifact defines reality by manipulating it. In setting out from the definition of the artifact made in 1979 by Marx W. Wartofsky, and his categorization of primary artifacts (material), secondary artifacts (discourse on the artifact) and tertiary artifacts (metadiscourse on the artifact), it is not our intention in this special issue of Sociology and Technoscience to exhaust all of the artifact's possibilities and definitions. Our points of departure are: i) to enquire into the possibility of the human without the artifactual; ii) to explore the boundaries of the artifactual (between analogical and digital) through new forms and manifestations of materiality, to show the possibilities of an artifact's dematerialization, and of rematerialization/reembodiment through artifacts; and iii) to explore the space of the human and the artifactual: in terms of materiality, reproduction, communication and morality.

Fortunately we have been unable to answer all of these questions, but we venture to offer five contributions that give an idea of the breadth and diversity of the possibilities of artifacts, approached from the perspectives of literary studies, sociology, art and gender studies. Five themes are presented here: Andersen's tales, forensic practices in the case of disappeared people, the art of Artificial Life, tupperware sex and the influenza A virus. Although varied in character these proposals are articulated around a common axis: the artifact is characterized by its capacity of agency that situates us in the world.

Frederike Felcht opens the issue with a surprising analysis of the artifact in its most immediate meaning as an object. The Hans Christian Andersen's tales abandon the world of timeless storytelling to emerge like a document of the process of industrialization far removed from the mythical world of fairytales. Objects as animated forces occupy the central place of his narrations; their agency questions contemporary conceptions of subjectivity and situates the subject in a subordinate position with respect to the material world. A magical quality emerges from counterposing the subjectivities of characters (human and material); the tension between the two worlds creates the force that gives transcendence to the tales and turns them into fairytales.

Just like Vaucanson's duck inaugurating the possibilities of automata as courtly entertainment, Gabriel Gatti's "Robotín" takes us to the world of the people who disappeared in the clandestine detention centers of Uruguay and Argentina, and to forensic anthropology as expert knowledge aimed at repairing human rights abuses. This is a moral techno-scientific technique that, due to its object, reincarnates bones and provides them with an identity once again. As in the following article, the body acquires its meaning through the processes of reincarnation, identity is anchored in the traces of physical remains.

Daniel López de Rincón brings us back to the future with a gaze that gives us a preview of the role of life as raw material of artistic creation. The art of Artificial Life shows us the path of current perception of the biological in general, and of the body in particular. Where the social sciences appeared to have run aground on the forms of sublimating and surpassing the biological in favor of cyborgs and digital avatars, Media Art and Bio Art give an idea of the return of flesh, blood, bones, skin and entrails. The rematerialization and reincarnation of discourses on our societies (the practices are already there) tells us of the exhaustion of a paradigm marked by the possibilities of the digital. The biological is reincarnated in new bodies, renaturalized but not nostalgic. Biotechnology is now the new demiurge that takes us to another flesh: that mediated by genetic engineering.

Sex toys and specifically the vibrator are the artifacts chosen by Silvia Pérez Freire as totems of post-capitalist sexual culture. Sex as an article of consumption, the normalization of non-reproductive sexuality and struggles for women's sexual rights continue to be an open battlefield. The use of erotic toys is defined by heterosexist patterns of use, which shows us

the persistence of a markedly androcentric model of sexuality. The phallic totem resists the loss of its centrality even – or precisely – on the terrain of the most uninhibited, ludic and commercial sexuality.

Andrés G. Sequel closes the issue by demonstrating the perspective of the artifact by situating it on the terrain of performativity beyond the gadget or the “tool”. The aim of his article is to present the symbolic qualities of the artifact in the case of influenza virus A (H1N1) and the simile created through linguistic structures and methodological arbitrariness. As we can recall, this led to a pandemic alarm, which moved from an initial apocalyptic threat against humanity to subsequent suspicion about the management efficiency of the WHO.

That the world is artifactual at the same time as human is nothing new. Thus, let us now be guided through reality by the artifact.