Show must go on? Problems of bio art preservation in the example Plant~Animals (2021–) by Elvin Flamingo

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The paper examines problems of exhibiting, storing and preserving of media art. I demonstrate the challenges of exposure and maintenance of artworks with non-human habitats using the example of Elvin Flamingo’s bio art installation Plant~Animals (2021–). Bioethics will be discussed in relation to bio art display and conservation, as well as the study of co-authorship. The paper aims to show that posthumanist rhetoric has a significant role in the preservation of Elvin Flamingo’s works of art. I investigate various conservation strategies for works from the Symbiosis of Creation series, including the use of virtual reality in the preservation of media art.


1. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the new millennium, Eduardo Kac presented Alba (2000) – a rabbit engineered to express the green fluorescent protein (GFP). The public had only seen the animal in images, but in the same year, Marta de Menezes’ work of art, Nature? (1999), was available to experience in real time (Kac 2007, p.219). Although the last two decades have seen a constant trend in institutions’ caution and reserve in exhibiting bio art. While the genre is present, and like any other work, bio art deteriorates and requires maintenance. In general, media art events rarely include living creatures in shows, but there are exceptions. Elvin Flamingo, a Polish artist, has been designing large-scale habitats for non-human organisms for over ten years, bringing new challenges to audiences, curators, and art conservators.

The article will illustrate the challenges of exposure and preservation of artworks with non-human habitats using Elvin Flamingo’s Symbiosis of Creation as an example. Bioethics will be discussed in relation to bio art display and conservation, as well as the study of co-authorship. The study aims to demonstrate that posthumanist rhetoric has a significant role in the preservation of Elvin Flamingo’s works of art. The purpose of this paper is to review the arguments for showing bio artworks and emphasise, according to the idea of Symbiosis of Creation, the importance of the presence of all actors of Plant~Animals.

Using the Decision Making Model based on the experiences of contemporary art conservators, various scenarios for the art protection will be considered, including the usage of modern technology like virtual reality. These conservation paths will serve as the framework for developing a preservation strategy for works in the Symbiosis of Creation series, but also will be a contribution to the field of media art conservation. This research provides a case study for bio art curators and conservators, as well as an addition to the literature that recognises posthumanist analysis and virtual reality in the preservation of media art.

2. ACTORS

2.1 Elvin Flamingo

The main author of the project, and part of it at the same time, is a Polish artist Elvin Flamingo, real name Jarosław Czarnecki. He is a designer with a graphic and video practical background. He continues to use his cinema knowledge in his most recent initiatives, which combine art, biology, and technology. Elvin Flamingo is a modern artist...
working in the field of bio art who exhibits at the largest media art festivals in Poland – Media Art Biennale WRO in Wroclaw, and around the world – Plant~Animals (Fig.1,4), the main subject of this paper, was a part of the program of Ars Electronica 2021.

2.2 Plant~Animals

Another important actor in Plant~Animals installation is Symagiglithera rosscoffensis (Fig.2, 5), worms for which Elvin Flamingo built whole installation with two incubators. These flatworms are both – a plant and an animal. Symagiglithera rosscoffensis is transparent, but owe its green colour to the tiny cells of the Platymonas algae that pass inside the body of flatworm. Those non-human beings require the creation of appropriate conditions in an environment other than the natural sea coast, such as: a temperature of 14 ° C, ph 8.2 sea water about salinity 3.3% (Flamingo’s website). The conditions and forms of life that the flatworm takes are important in the context of the protection of the ecosystem and thus the entire installation.

2.3 Incubators

Installation consists of two incubators with Symagiglithera rosscoffensis worm habitats and the equipment for looking after and looking at them. The incubators with a total cubature of 0.5 m³ are set on metal, white cross-welded tables with wood-glass structures resembling a train station, in which are located both: equipment and habitats. Inside incubators are tools to care for them. All of the equipment is designed to provide the best conditions for the worm’s survival while also allowing researchers to examine non-human social movements, interdependencies, and interactions with humans. The relationship prominent in Elvin Flamingo’s Symbiosity of Creation concept is explored in this study on behaviour and networks.

3. NO SCRIPT

Elvin Flamingo's film interests are prominent in his bio artworks, as he underlines while discussing the motivation for Plant~Animals. The artist refers two incubators, or actually the plans inside them, to Lars von Trier’s movies Dogville (2003) and Manderlay (2005). It is an open form that doesn’t require a script or a research protocol as the artist underlines, which is crucial when considering Elvin Flamingo’s entire body of work. This is a one-of-a-kind experiment, just like the two discussed von Trier’s films, and the described Symbiosity of Creation is an idea of Elvin Flamingo in harmony with which he has been working since 2012 (Flamingo 2014).

Symbiosity of Creation is Elvin Flamingo’s artistic approach, which he characterises as ‘interactive and symbiotic relationship of creating common work’ (Flamingo 2014, p.25). There is no single author in the symbiotic process, and Elvin Flamingo claims that he was obliged to take on the role of co-creator, or even that he is only one of the many actors who are constructing this network – ‘shared quotidian.’ The artist used the Symbiotic Art Manifesto by Leonel Moura and Henrique Garcia Pereira from 2004 to develop a framework for the project, detailing the guidelines of his approach termed Symbiosity of Creation (Flamingo 2014, p.40) by following these principles:

- change in the position of the author from the demiurge to participant,
- departure from narcissism and concentration on the artist,
- redefinition of interactivity understood as the relationship of living beings: humans and non-humans,
- departure from the conviction that everything can be art,
rejection of any manifestations of arrogance,
full respect for all participating beings,
constant creation of the work even if it is not exhibited,
artwork as a process in which every step of human or non-human is important and dependent on each other, without evaluating which is more important.

First piece of Symbiosity of Creation was the ants habitat Reconstruction of Non-human Culture (Fig. 3) that has the beginning in 2012 and it continues till now. The project began with attempts to construct a farm ant colony, and the author set a completion date of 2034, which is the foreseeable moment of the queen ant's death, as it is the end of the entire kingdom. Initially, the installation was divided into four incubators, each of which was specially made by the artist, but was later modified and reconfigured by ants. Elvin Flamingo devoted a few years for everyday care after colonies and he reflected that ‘beyond the incubators […] this work is nothing more than the shared quotidian of me and my ants’ (Flamingo 2014, p.25).

![Figure 3: The Symbiosis of Creation / Reconstruction of Non-human Culture by Elvin Flamingo (2012). Courtesy of the artist.](image)

4. CO-AUTHORSHIP

The investigation of Elvin Flamingo’s artworks reveals a number of intriguing concerns on the problem map. First, his works are part of the bio art genre, which is similar to using scientific laboratories as artists’ studios. Second, the artist’s laboratory activities include the research of posthumanist philosophy and a critique of anthropocentrism. Finally, the most important feature of his work is his search for the quotidian in art, as well as his collaboration with non-human species in the creation of Symbiosis of Creation. Elvin Flamingo underlines the significance of the work, imbuing it with posthuman ideas.

Plant–Animals, for example, can be classed as a type of bio art that preserves the laboratory accuracy scheme, in which live animals are caged and watched, and analyses the complex of 'dependency-responsibility-information' as Viola and Piotr Krajewscy describe (Krajewscy 2015, p.60). The project illustrates cooperation between art and science, artist and scientist, therefore similarity of tools, exchange of observations and experiences drawn by Victoria Vesna (Vesna 2011, pp.15-21). Ryszard W. Kluszczyński describes this distinctive new way of combining art, science, and technology through the example of The Tissue Culture & Art Project, which relocates scientific laboratories to galleries and art institutions, allowing viewers to see works of art as ‘the realm of everyday life’ (Kluszczyński 2012, p.78) as in the work of Elvin Flamingo.

The rejection of the divide of culture and nature after Bruno Latour, as well as his ‘actor-network’ theory, (Latour 2005) may be seen in Elvin Flamingo’s works. The artist firstly underlined the rejection of arrogance and anthropocentrism, emphasizing the threat that Timothy Morton describes in Dark ecology (2016) and then he redirected attention from human life to non-human life forms. Monika Bakke's book (Bakke 2012) covers artistic actions in the sphere of visual arts that contribute to the establishment and deepening of posthumanist views, and this activity might be referenced there. According to Bakke, the human subject opens out to a diversity of life forms, or to the non-human universe in which he actively and passively participates (Bakke 2012, p.232) – and this co-participation is linked to the major idea of Symbiosis of Creation.

The key word ‘symbiosis’ has multiple meanings in terms of Plan–Animals: firstly it indicates the symbiotic nature of the two organisms of the flatworm and algae, but also the co-existence of this organism with the artist, furthermore posthumanist discourse on symbioticism and ‘companion species’ by Donna Haraway (Haraway 2003). Elvin Flamingo emphasised the symbiosis not only in the word ‘symbiosis,’ but also in his new interpretation of the manifesto: in redefining interactivity in general relations between living beings, people and non-people, or in emphasizing full respect for all beings, treating them equally, towards zoe – the perspective of life in general. The artist not only recognises the significance of the non-human element in his work, but also highlights that each side has a creative influence on the other, regardless of who is more essential.

Therefore, it can be summarised after Bakke that culture in its various forms, including its ‘scientific incarnations’, is produced by both humans and
non-humans. On top of that, the artist himself says about *Reconstruction of Non-human Culture* as ‘one of the thousands of actors-workers in the networks’ and ‘beyond the incubators […] in which ants live and reproduce’ (Flamingo 2014, p.25). Just like Haraway proposed the concept of becoming with animals, emphasizing ‘symbiosi’, where different species are in fact participants in our vital processes (Bakke 2012, p.95).

5. ACTION OR NO ACTION

The current state of study indicates that time-based-media conservation, particularly bio art, is still a continuing process. However, media art, like experimental forms and new technology that soon lose their properties, requires conservation care. The presence of biological elements in bio art, in particular bio-transfigurations, requires not just a materials science but also an ethical perspective. Jens Hauser wrote about the protection of bio art that it is aging like a film – leaving behind documents, photos, posters or flyers, which further recall the process of ‘new life itself in the manner of a synecdoche’ (Hauser 2005, p.185). Therefore, consideration of conservators includes not only the works themselves, but also the documentation, artifacts and emotions they leave behind.

The materiality of artworks, but even more so intangible values, are at the centre of the modern art conservation strategy. The variety of techniques, technologies, styles and materials, as well as the approach of artists, does not allow for the designation of a specific conservation path like methodology assigned to certain types of classic art. Caste studies and work patterns developed by conservators themselves are the main sources of improvement in a maintenance strategy of modern art. The most important tool is The Decision Making Model for Contemporary Art Conservation and Presentation (Tab.1.) in which the individual elements of a work are valued to determine its significance, thus to establish a conservation strategy for a particular artwork (SBMK 1999, TH Köln 2019).

Following the Decision Making Model, it can be condensed that the idea of *Symbiosi* series is the artist’s coexistence with living organisms in an artificial, quasi-laboratory environment that he built for them. In the case of an ant habitat, non-human actors have been kept alive as one continuous colony since 2012, but flatworm habitats are replaced shortly after several weeks or days after their natural death. The idea is to maintain this relationship between both actors: ‘My works are works of art only when he lives, exists and works with them. When I am gone my art disappears’ says Elvin Flamingo (Flamingo’s website) and this quote will define the entire strategy of conservation.

Table 1: Decision Making Model for Contemporary Art Conservation and Presentation. TH Köln.

In the *Symbiosi* series, in order for the work of art be complete, following actors are needed: human and non-human being in an (non)artificial environment created by the artist. Therefore, scenarios in which some of these elements are missing should be discussed.

5.1 No Incubators

Material construction of incubators are relatively important, only those referring to the Hamburg train station and hand-made by Elvin Flamingo have an artistic value, but all laboratory equipment is replaceable. The artist respects the passage of time; therefore he would leave small damages as long as they do not affect the functionality of the work. The author talks about incubators as warehouses and in the utopian version of the project, where all actors merge into one, says that he himself could become such an incubator for flatworms. The conversation also features inspiration from von Trier’s films and his unfinished trilogy, Elvin Flamingo allows for the hypothetical extension of the installation also by this third part, not necessarily even in the form of an incubator. It’s worth mentioning that because the environment can be expanded, it can also augment into a virtual form, allowing the environment to take on a variety of shapes – following the principle that works of media art are characterised by variability and changeability according to the studies of Hanna B. Hölling (Hölling 2017).
5.2 No flatworms

Flatworms, unlike ants whose life dictates the end of the artwork, are replaced when they die, so conservation is about maintaining the continuity of the habitat, thus cooperating with Station Biologique de Roscoff that delivers these creatures. Equally important is a transport, also in terms of changing legal issues. In this instance, the best option is to take care of flatworms or to take no action – which would mean the end of the work. In that situation, only the presentation of previous performances, documentation, and artifacts will be a possible preservation method.

Bio art in the form of a laboratory is by definition a field for experiments and a place for techno-artistic reflections, including ethical ones. The subject is widely analysed in Hauser's research, or in Joanna Zylinska’s book where she debated on ‘new bioethics beyond analytical philosophy’ and writes about responsibility (Zylinska 2009). In terms of Elvin Flamingo's artworks, his scientific research should be highlighted, as well as his kinship – the artist said that if even one small worm dies, he dies with it. The question of ethics in terms is whether the artist would pass this responsibility onto someone else, which leads to the last scenario to consider.

5.3 No artist

The quote ‘When I'm gone my art disappears’ should be repeated here again because it has impact on the strategy of preservation. Although Elvin Flamingo creates an artistic manifesto which is a categorical departure from the artist's egoistic positioning in the centre, he admits that Symbiosis of Creation does not exist without him. Following and respecting artistic statements, Plant–Animals should not be displayed as an incomplete work of art. In this case, alternative preservation options are proposed.

If treat Symbiosis of Creation as a ‘kind of biotheater’, the policy of preservation should be analogous to performance preservation, that is conservation through documentation. This form of protection includes archiving or presenting photographic documentation, video, 360 or VR projection in which immersive viewers could watch non-human colonies, for example from the artist's perspective. The participant would virtually complement the required three actors avoiding discussed ethical responsibility.

In order to consider each option of the preservation / presentation strategy, Elvin Flamingo was asked how he imagine the works in a hundred years. In the interview, he emphasised that along with the takeover of the work by the new owner, he has no control, but still trusts restorers, curators and art historians in the matter of preservation. In the context of an unknown future, he is interested in more fascinating approaches to the subject of conservation, which could be the creation of his clone – as regards, he allows the option of a complete reproduction of the artwork, reconstruction of Symbiosis of Creation.

Elvin Flamingo, being fully consistent in his activities as part of the Symbiosis of Creation, underlines that installations are only created when he is a part of them. As a result, these events can be viewed as performances and protected such as. About the relationship between real presence and metaphorical representation in performance wrote Hauser. His quote will emphasise the importance of Elvin Flamingo's role in his artworks: 'Whereas the theatrical actor still metaphorically embodies a role, the performance artist brings his own body and his own real biography into play' (Hauser 2005, p.184).

One of the important steps in the conservation strategy is examining similar examples. The post-conference Living Matter publication of the Getty Conservation Institute will undoubtedly be a suitable source to find works in which biological material was used just once or is replaced on each display (not yet published, Getty Institute website). Along with the review, I will cite an intervention The Theater of Disappearance by Villar Rojas who refers his work to 'parasitic relationship'. This is an example of an artist with a different mentality — parasitism rather than symbiosis, as Elvin Flamingo suggests – but it still places a major focus on the artist's involvement in co-creating the piece of art.

To summarise, the conservation strategy should aim to maintain the show with all actors. In terms of Plant–Animals, the work of art does not exist without a colony of worms placed in warehouses that are looked after by the artist. The artwork may be, according to the author, but does not have to be watched by viewers – the piece of art lasts even outside the official exhibition, if only the actors are alive and present. Due to the biological nature of the actors, the forms of presentation of the work should also be considered within other realities.
The study has shown that the greatest researchers’ concern – bioethics, is determined by art projects such as Elvin Flamingo. As evidenced by his approach, who rejects the artist’s decisive stance in his credo *Symbiosis of Creation* and defines art as coexistence and co-creation with non-humans. Following this rule, which was established in the course of the analysis of the work and the authors, various paths of the conservation strategy were proposed. In the paper, multiple analysis revealed that not only the focus on the scientific part of bio art, but the posthumanist theories explain the meaning of the artwork and the subsequent assessment of the audience: observers, curators, art conservators.

Using the Decision Making Model tool, the following conclusion are drawn from the present study. The care plan proposed for Elvin Flamingo’s work *Plant–Animals* serves as the foundation for the protection of works from the *Symbiosis of Creation* series, but also provides a framework for the exploration of the bio art conservation process. These results may not applicable to all bio artworks, but in the absence of further research, It can be used as a model for similar case studies. Furthermore, a technique for avoiding the bioethics dilemma was presented: transferring the experiment into virtual reality. This study has demonstrated that the artistic idea of *Symbiosis of Creation* focuses on co-creation and ‘shared quotidian’, using the borrowed term ‘biotheatre’ should be treated as a kind of performance. Despite some restrictions in terms of preserving this type of work, there are two primary approaches: preservation as presentation by documentation or ‘show must go on’.

### 7. REFERENCES


Zylinska J. (2009), *Bioethics in the Age of New Media*, The MIT Press.