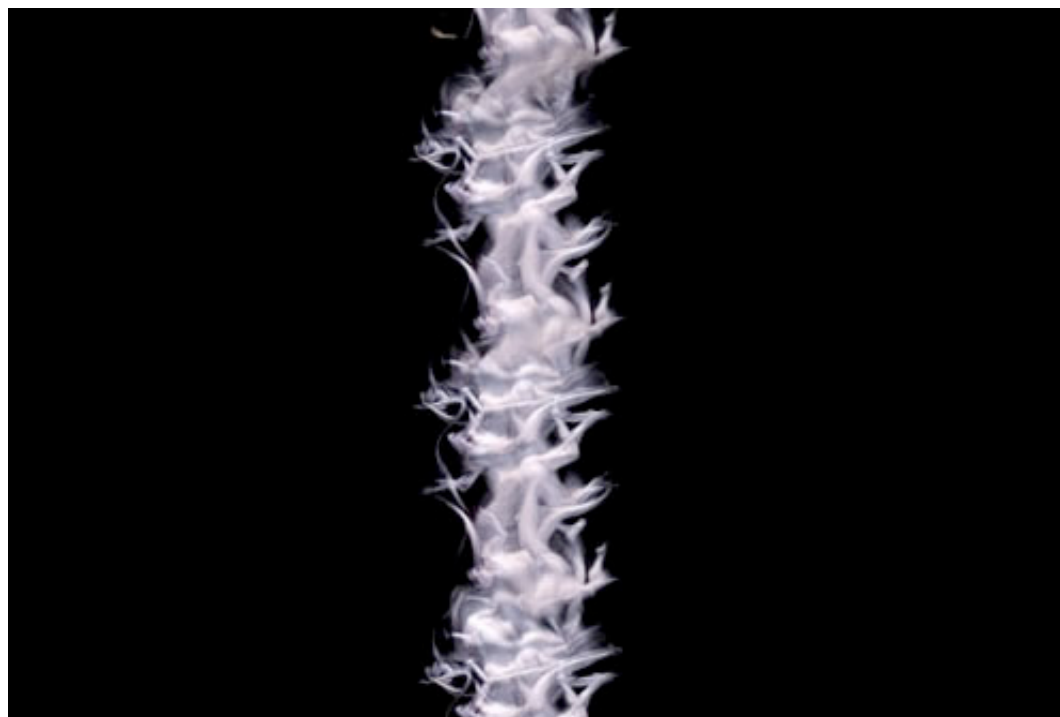


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## THE ART AND THE EPIDEMIOLOGICAL CRITICISM OF GINA CZARNECKI

Txt: Marco Mancuso / Eng: Monica Fontana

**Gina Czarnecki** is undoubtedly an conscious and sensitive artist, for the sensitive issues she courageously deals with, for her subjects, for her analysis and research methods she chose to elaborate, and for the aesthetic impact as well as the fascination of her work. This feeling is in her environmental and audiovisual work, and this feelings are even stronger when you have the chance to meet and talk to her.

The British woman Gina Czarnecki is represented by **Forma**, and she works in the installation setting and method. She deals with as much complex as difficult topics, which are damned difficult to translate into a work of art. Epidemiological criticism on the one hand, and the effects that a virus, an external agent, a disease, or a genetic modification may have on body and motion. On this occasion, the human body shows its unfailing insecurity and fragility, its beauty and its decadent and almost rotten spontaneity during the great development of biotechnology.

These analyses and critiques do not stop before a mere reflection on the eventual macroscopic and superficial effects of an infection. Yet, through the studies and researches by **Francis Galton and Stephen Corbett** on texts and through a melting of present and past experiences, memories and emotions (her quarantine in a hospital after a virus contraction in Africa, the stories of her grandfather about his experience with bacteriological tests in a Nazi concentration camp during the Second World War) they become an excuse and a tool for the analysis "of the similarities and differences of the various biological infections, the cultural, political and economic issues related to studies on these diseases and the economics of R&D used for their treatment" . That is the artist's thought, who goes on saying that "all this has been connected to an investigation still under way, on the reorganization and reaction systems when new entities (for example, new players, mutant organisms, infections, "synthetic" genes, and new species) come to join it, and give rise to wider implications than the technological and biological ones. Finally, we also dealt with the way the community evolves after the arrival of new players, such as asylum seekers or migrant workers."



In a collaboration between Biotechnologists, programmers, dancers, sound artists and musicians, Czarnecki's films and installations are related to man's relationship with diseases, evolution and genetic research. That is a complex and often devastating relationship, for the bodies the artist decides to be staging in his work: they are unconscious actors of the degenerative and ongoing project the artist produces with the help of refined digital imaging techniques and an obsessive audio-visual coordination. And this work is complex also for the audience, whose role is to contemplate the work, from a perceptual and a mechanical point of view. **Contagion** is for example an interactive

installation, in which a properly defined movement of people on the stage determines the degenerative evolution of the virus of SARS transpiring in a stream of sounds, colours and abstract images. A work that asks the viewers to take an active part in the context, to assume their responsibilities in relation to how these issues are spreading in our society through the action of the mass media, through our fears, our incapacity to take info and assume a critical role. *Contagion* has received the prestigious *Sciart Awards* in UK, and the *Art and Innovation Program in Victoria* (Australia) and the *Melbourne City Council Arts Project Award*. More generally, his works have been exhibited in the major museums and in the most important festivals of our globe, including the London Natural History Museum, the Australian Center for the Moving Image in Melbourne and the Ars Electronica in Linz.

However, the work of Gina Czarnecki had previously cared for these issues, through the work **Infected**, in which the work the body is perhaps even stronger, from the aesthetic point of view at least. Through dance, movement and its relationship with sound, the artist's extremely sensitive eye focuses on his actor's degenerative experience under the attack of an external agent, which is in this case identified as a potential future hyper -technology. *Infected* is a film in which a bio-engineered body partly dissolves into a homogeneous flow of liquid shapes, and partly into long claustrophobic, hallucinatory, almost masochistic path, and this is suggested by a body suffering during his process of metamorphosis.

*Infected* was Gina Czarnecki's first step into the exploration of expressive potentials of a world, through dance, dancers, their use of the body, their movements, which was the perfect solution for her poetry and her ability to work with digital imaging techniques. That exploration was further developed through the relationship with the **Australian DanceTheatre in Melbourne** and was more concrete with the triptych of works **Nascent, Spine and Cell Mass**: the first film (music by Christain Fennesz) was on show at the *Adelaide Film Festival in 2005* and was awarded throughout the world; the second one is an evolution of the first one in the form of a site-specific environmental installation, approximately 6 meters high and commissioned by *Forma for the Festival Av06 Newcastle*; the third one is an adaptation from *Spine's* gallery and has recently recently been exhibited at the Palazzo Pio in Carpi during new media art **Direct Digital**. The latter event allowed me to meet Gina Czarnecki and gave us the green light to set up this interview ...



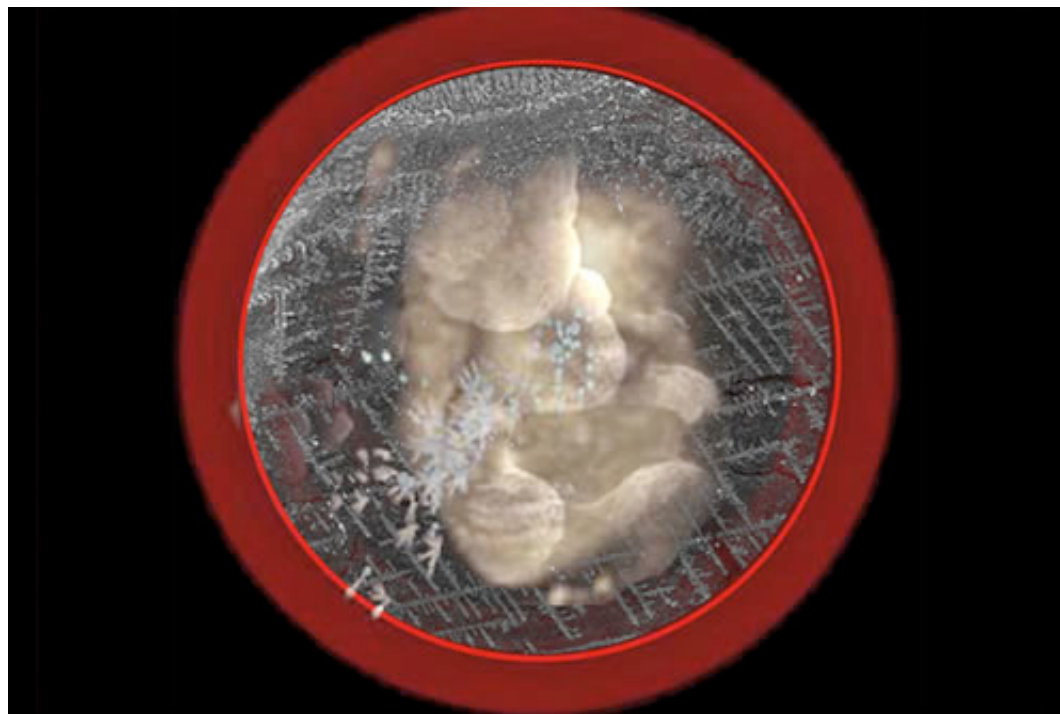
**Marco Mancuso:** *Contagion* is your recent work, and is strongly linked with your experience in a hospital after a virus infection you had in Africa and it develops through wide thoughts about the fragility of natural systems before a disease and about the concept of viruses in general. Well, probably someone else has already asked this question, but I'd just like to know what were your conclusions on the topics you studied in your thesis before the development of the project and that I introduced at the beginning of our interview. Besides, I'd like to know how your art project helped you find answers to your questions.

**Gina Czarnecki:** The downside I experienced to large expensive to make, multi-trans-disciplinary-collaborative artworks is that this one in particular required substantial funding. So from its inception of the initial idea (2002) to the funding in 2005 and completion in 2007 I had moved from Britain to Australia and back again, had two children, quitted my academic position and so many other substantial life changes that this then traced the development and change of ideas over this tumultuous period. What I started out with I had to stick to by some means, but ultimately my experience with the epidemiologists and programmers significantly changed the work and my thinking around these issues.

Australia is a complex amalgamation of different immigrants forming the majorities, all of whom considered other countries 'homeland' despite never having been, Greek, Italian, Serbian, etcetera. Looking at how this culture operated in the threat of SARS made me further understand that ancient traditions and methods of quarantine were the only effective methods, particularly in the cases where the virus mutates quicker than the vaccines can be developed. This method of containing and therefore controlling pandemic would be relatively easy in Australia, a land mass so far away from any other. And electronic disconnection the ideal method of quarantine – no one can fly, access money, and so on. I was really lucky to work with the three epidemiologists that I did, and of course Tim Kreger, my programmer on this. I became to understand that the discipline of epidemiology is not only looking at spread of pandemic but also the behaviour of people- human movement – ideal for a motion based interactive work. I think if I were to draw a conclusion it would be that, as Stephen Corbett said, the fear of the pandemic is more lethal than the pandemic itself'. It led me to my conclusion that it the mediation of information that can control

spread and that the biggest killer is fear. The spread of fear through the image and how these work on us on conscious and subconscious levels – like the microbe – sneaking in through the back door silently.

Throughout this time I also made spine which references 9/11 (how quickly a date becomes a symbol and owned!) Contagion became a reference to biological spread but also reference to visual symbol buried deep in subconscious triggering associations and references that we are so fast to form based on how information is mediated, our understanding of vocabulary, our sensitivity to images in blacks, our focus, our knowledge,



**Marco Mancuso:** As in "Contagion" there is a close relationship among the motor activity of people, their mutual interaction and their relationship with machines (and, therefore, with the circulation of the virus). So, if I consider your idea, do you want to lead people to think about their role in the process of diffusion, as victims of these processes or as active active and conscious subjects?

**Gina Czarnecki:** I wanted to make people investigate on multiple levels. The first level of interface is painting like a child drags their finger through different colour pigments to mix new colours and the beauty of really playful investigations of the palette, mixing. Its only when people connect with one another or are connected to the viral agent that they potentially become infected. Infection in this sense can be seen in many ways- our brushing against strangers even momentarily can influence our understanding of life, change the course and shape of it, positively and negatively. The risk of contamination or the risk of no contact: which is less likely in the long term to damage the health? The interaction with others is a surface distraction also. Our self-consciousness prevents at times us from sinking deep into the present (the artwork). Without total focus at point it is hard to perceive the buried images and disparate references that are like dots to be joined – connections that make pathways to understanding more complex and dark. If you are in there alone you get a totally different experience than with strangers or friends. You have to be able to focus and whilst initially interact with others, become both the participant and the observer, instrumental in the spread or containment of 'infection' and in this sense infection is the network and chronology of images that joined lead to much wider, deeper content than the childlike dancing interface

**Marco Mancuso:** In what did your work with scientists and epidemiologists consist? Your works (especially "Contagion") are commonly defined as artistic projects on the border between art and science. On my opinion, the link between art and science (as for example bioart, the Nanoart or other arts using biological or chemical reactions, artificial intelligence and so on) is possible when artists directly operate on the search for a technological process based on aesthetics or design, or work on an intellectual reflection that originates from a natural and scientific process. Therefore, can you explain how you worked on viruses, and studied or transported their effects in an audiovisual reality?

**Gina Czarnecki:** I look at parallels. I'm interested in new imaging technologies and the relationship professions have as arbiters of the authentic or fact. For example images published by science are products of the technology rather than factual images of reality, but we see them as truth and proof, I'm interested in the professions of artist and scientist and our ability to speak in knows and unknowns. I have always seen the human body's function, as the ultimate machine, if we can understand that process we can see parallels in social organisations, systems of operation. I am more interested in who makes value judgements about worth and so on. I hope that I don't translate science, I think this is not good example of art and science collaboration and questions too what we consider art to be. I am interested in definition, classification, borderlines, loopholes and grey areas, systems, structures, mediation, choreography in its biological form. Also the incredible speed of medical discoveries in relation to the increasing population, where it will go, who makes the decisions and on what basis, the relationship between fact and fiction, religion and mysticism and science... and so on.



**Marco Mancuso:** How much are you concerned in highlighting a possible link between conceptual art and advanced scientific research with your work and your research, and apply a critical eye on the impact of new science on contemporary society? Moreover, artists have always undertaken this operation over the centuries...

**Gina Czarnecki:** This is a complex question. For me there is – at some meeting points, no difference between art and scientific research. My interest has always been in human evolution and biology and what i do is art: the two combine naturally and coincidentally it falls at a time when there is much emphasis on combination of art and science. Both are exploratory. However the value of art is undermined by a short term evaluation system. If we can evaluate the impact of things 20 years after, then the power of some art works would have equal impact to scientific discovery. In my mind this is a necessity for science to communicate and become part of humanities thinking. Science has to be objective but mediation of science portrays a sort of fait accomplis or knowns rather than the unknowns, undermining the research and thinking of scientists, just as the mediation of art is reduced to sensationalism in some mainstream press. The impact of new sciences on contemporary society is everywhere, perhaps we are the catalyst to encouraging thought for possibilities offered by this that are not on the mediated collective consciousness. I think that most people who work in this area are equally excited about these possibilities of the new, but concerned about who makes decisions and what is driving this.

**Marco Mancuso:** In another work "Nascent", the video built by the movements, the bodies and the gestures of the dancers evolves into a complex ballet, showing creatures in motion. In Cell Mass N2 (which is the evolution of Nascent), these entities literally evolve in complex masses of quasi-cells, made of bodies in motion that create new forms of life. According to you, how much strength is there in the link between the physical body (the dance), the virtual body (or the digital body) and their visual representation (the video)?

**Gina Czarnecki:** The body is one thing we are all familiar with. We can all relate on some level to the image of another's body by comparison and reflection. The immediate image of body and visual seduction through beauty engages and seduces, even if momentarily. I am fascinated with the body as a mechanism, looking at the inner functions, and as collective bodies in swarm behaviours. For me what video lacks that performance has is the actual physical presence. The chemistry of bodies, the heat and smell and vitality. This for me is somewhat lost if there's a big distance between performers and audience. Video has to evoke this in other ways, through the image; what we see, what we think we see and what we perceive. And how sound can move specific areas of the viewers/participants physical/emotive body. I play much on the borders of perception, peripheral vision, grey areas and loopholes: grey areas between truth and illusion is a powerful area that allows trains of consciousness and connections in the individual's knowledge and memory.

**Marco Mancuso:** Your work creates large aesthetic spaces, audiovisual landscapes where viewers are gradually immersed. Usually people are attracted by the complexity and beauty of your images, and their relations with sound. How do you work on the delicate balance between aesthetics of elegance, charm and complexity, and the power of hypnotic visual games?

**Gina Czarnecki:** I try hard to achieve this. Basically I have to immerse myself, lose myself into the time and space and size of the intertwining of the separate elements to create perfect unity. I am lucky to have had such fantastic people to work with, Christian Fennesz who I think reaches the same space in consciousness when he is creating, and Ulf Langheinrich who works totally like I do, immersed and focused and deep. I don't try to create this, it's just what comes out. I have to love what I'm making or there is no point. At times I go through periods of total redundancy. Barriers, and then it is surpassed and comes together usually through elimination, achieving simplicity the other side of complexity. Ideally wanting people to be as totally immersed as I am in the making and thinking as in the viewing, the ideal objective would be to enable people to afford the time and space for it to temporarily take over, submit to its presence.



**Marco Mancuso:** I read that your life changed radically after a trip with your father to Poland when you were a child, to visit some of the Nazi concentration camps and has greatly influenced your art in the following years. Provided that all is perfectly clear, I would like to know something more right from you. It seems that your regard on disease, on the transformations of human beings, on bodies and on individual cells, on the effects that some external viruses cause on the human body, all reveal the impact that an external agent can be harmful to our frail creatures at any time in our history. It does not matter if the agent is a virus, or a natural catastrophe, a technological device or a human being

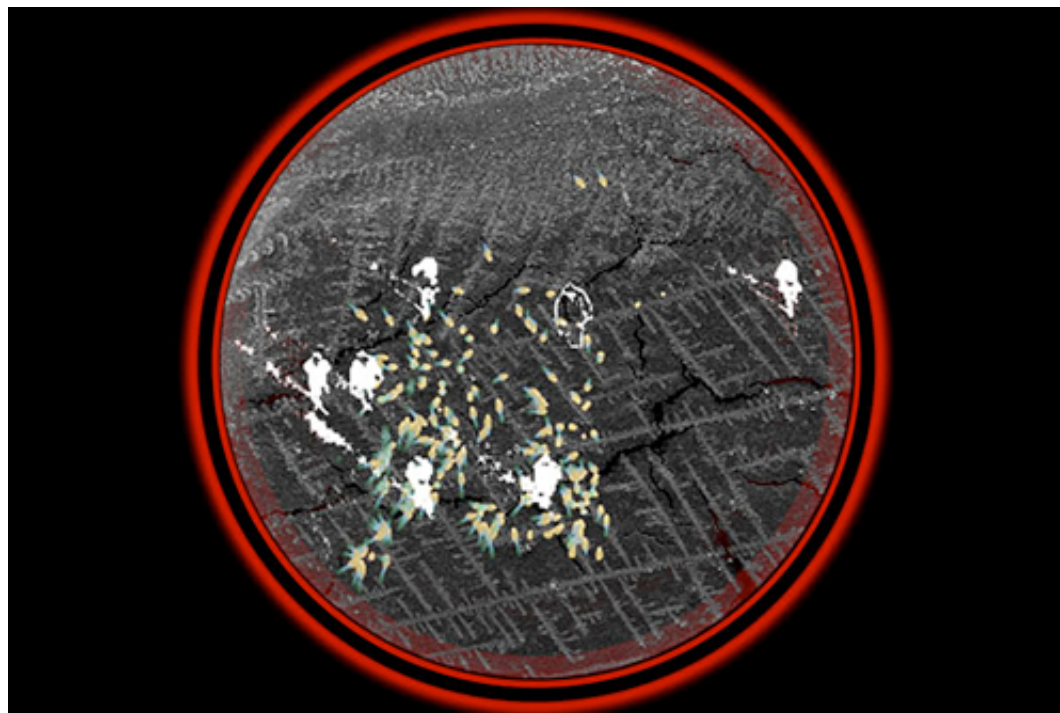
**Gina Czarnecki:** This is complex. And my response fragmented, but will leave you marco to edit or readers to join the dots – im incapable at this moment of doing this and getting this back to you on time, I enjoy your questions. You have to remember to always see beauty. Depite content, my work endeavours to be aesthetically beautiful and I use this strategically to seduce the mind into another space from which other content emerges. The surface is important technically, conceptually and in terms of its power of introducing content.

It's the dehumanisation of other people that generally enables people to practice torture – make them indistinguishable from each other and know nothing – shaved; starved, uniformed we all look the same. (A uniform surface and a surface that evokes racism/ethnic cleansing etcetera)

Near the end of his life as my dad's health rapidly deteriorated he began to talk of his experiences in the camps that had been bottled up for most of his life. Learning what my dad had been through left scars of mental images on me too.

If you deconstruct something and reduce it to its constituent parts it becomes a measureable identifiable fragment. If you eliminate the shades of grey then things are easily divisible and identifiable. I became interested in Sir Frances Galton's physiological identification of human types, which was later used by Nazi in identification of race and by the medical profession for identification of "sub normality" . If you then look at how classifications are made in gait recognition software and classification of "potential terrorist" you realise that developments in systems of

classification are trailing way behind technological development. If you then apply deconstruction and identification of traits on a genetic level we get probabilities of the predisposition of traits such as homosexuality, alcoholism, being genetically determined. The mediation of genetic research by mainstream press and in the public mind was that these traits were carried by single genes that could be identified (and therefore eliminated) you see how dangerous it can get! My conversations with one geneticist who believed that everything was ultimately genetically determined believed that the areas of DNA between protein molecules were "redundant" (this is also what they are medically referred to as – redundant areas) – surely the body is so complex and refined machine to not carry around redundant requirements – how do we assess traits not expressed in the physiognomy? I.e. in mental processes, consciousness when much genetic research was done on chicken embryos and fruit flies?



Whilst we despise ethnic cleansing, racism, torture and want to see the perpetrators of this punished we are also living proof of the medical developments in the cures that came out of human experimentation in the camps. When the economy declines we see a rise of racism through competition and survival, countries borders close, our attention to others wealth and how they retain it intensifies and we beg for redistribution and fairness (for ourselves) – the goalposts shift

So how does the world cope with diminishing resources and an exponentially expanding population? We were 1 billion in 1920, in 2020 purported to be 9 billion. Taking that rate of expansion into the next 100 years some dramatic changes are necessary. Is the evil agent external? Or do we attribute the ideas and therefore ultimately the blame to a scapegoat that encapsulates our darkest thoughts which we would never dare express. The silent conspirators, the scapegoats, ....Is the external impure and the internal pure?

<http://www.ginaczarnecki.com/>

<http://www.forma.org.uk/artists/represented/gina-czarnecki>

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