

**UCLA**

**CSW Update Newsletter**

**Title**

Genesis Project as a Model of Gender Study Research

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3zx338p3>

**Author**

Chepelyk, Oksana

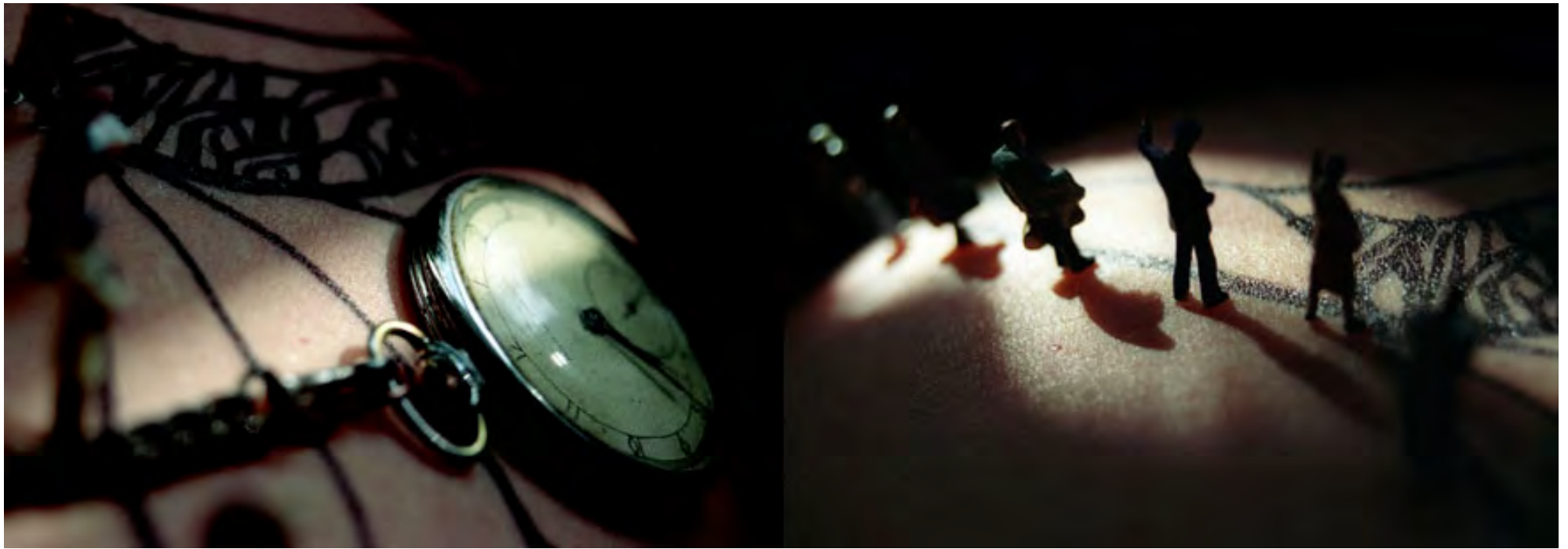
**Publication Date**

2011-03-01

# GENESIS PROJECT AS A MODEL OF GENDER STUDY RESEARCH

**BY OKSANA CHEPELYK**





## AN ARTIST LECTURE AT THE FOWLER MUSEUM AND

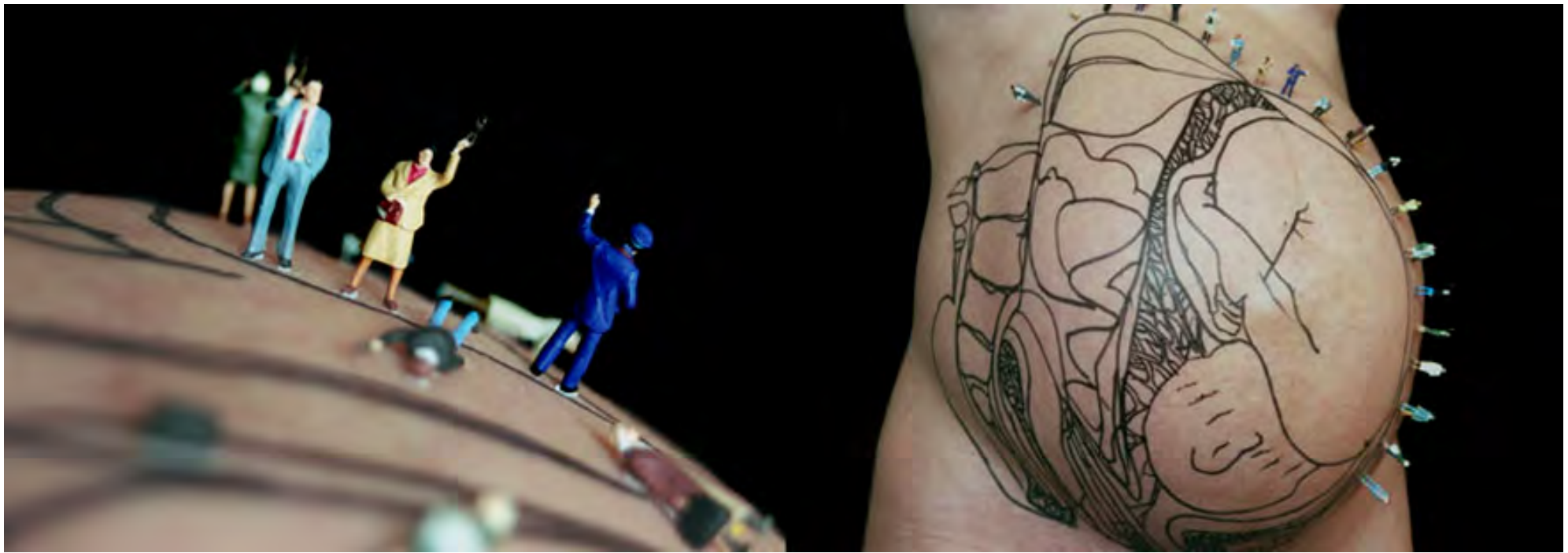
exhibition at UCLA Broad Art Center, “Genesis project as a model of gender study research” took place on February 10, with support from UCLA Design | Media Arts Department, Art | Sci Center at UCLA, and the UCLA Center for the Study of Women. “Genesis” is the continuation of the multimedia “Origin” ArtsLink Award winning project, which was shown in New York (2006), Santa Fe (2007), Yekaterinburg (2009), and Sarajevo (2010). The project is structured as a double helix with bases lying horizontally between them that incorporate gender, time, space, information flows, statistics, relational

aesthetics,<sup>1</sup> networking process,<sup>2</sup> science, reproductive techniques, commercialisation and the human being. It addresses issues of relations between migration and social development with economic, ecological, demographic and ethical problems. These units as the genes contain an open reading frame that can be transcribed, as well as *regulatory sequences* such as promoters and enhancers, which control the transcription of the open reading frame of social sphere.

The title of the project refers to the Book of Genesis—from Ancient Greek Γένεσις, meaning “birth, origin,”<sup>3</sup> and from Hebrew תְּיִשְׁאָרָב,

(B’reishit), meaning “in the beginning”<sup>4</sup>—which is the first book of the Hebrew Torah and of the Christian Old Testament.

“Genesis” is a multimedia installation that examines the genetic currency of the nation, through social sculpture. This project is about collaboration with volunteers (parents of babies) over a few years, thus linking social relations and art. Social sculpture lifts the aesthetic from its confines within a particular sphere or media, relocating it in a collective, imaginative work space in which we can see, rethink, and reshape our lives according to our creative potential. The term *social sculpture*



was coined by Joseph Beuys to refer to creative acts that would engage the community and affect the world around it.<sup>5</sup> Collective creativity opens new opportunities, being a method of research and analysis of objective conditions where the push to work is a necessity, and not just imagination of the author.<sup>6</sup> Social sculpture operates through projects having an explicit awareness of local place and time. Because of the demographic profile, economic status, and geographic factors of a community, the artworks deal with a variety of issues that take into account political, economic, and ecological aspects and features of urban development as

it relates to issues of displacement, economic stratification, and class division. This project presented a projection of a California birth rate monitor above a public space at UCLA on an inflatable balloon. A video image of a baby changed when a birth signal was received via Internet, approximately every minute. The images of newly born children of different origins create a collective image of a baby, transforming a "bio cell" into a "human planet." The invisible part of the project is the most important, because it is a network, established between the parents, who participated in the project, which is still ongoing. According to Giorgio

Agamben, "to show within a new planetary mankind some qualities which would guarantee its survival, to remove a thin barrier which separates false media advertising from a faultless external surface of the communications itself,—this is a task of our generation."<sup>7</sup> This project refers to the concept of the "noosphere" from Volodymyr Vernadsky.<sup>8</sup> Noosphere (derived from the Greek: noos, "mind," and sphaira, "sphere"), according to Vernadsky, denotes the "sphere of human thought." The noosphere is the third in a succession of phases of development of Earth. According to his theory, culture, which can accumulate energies and to prevent





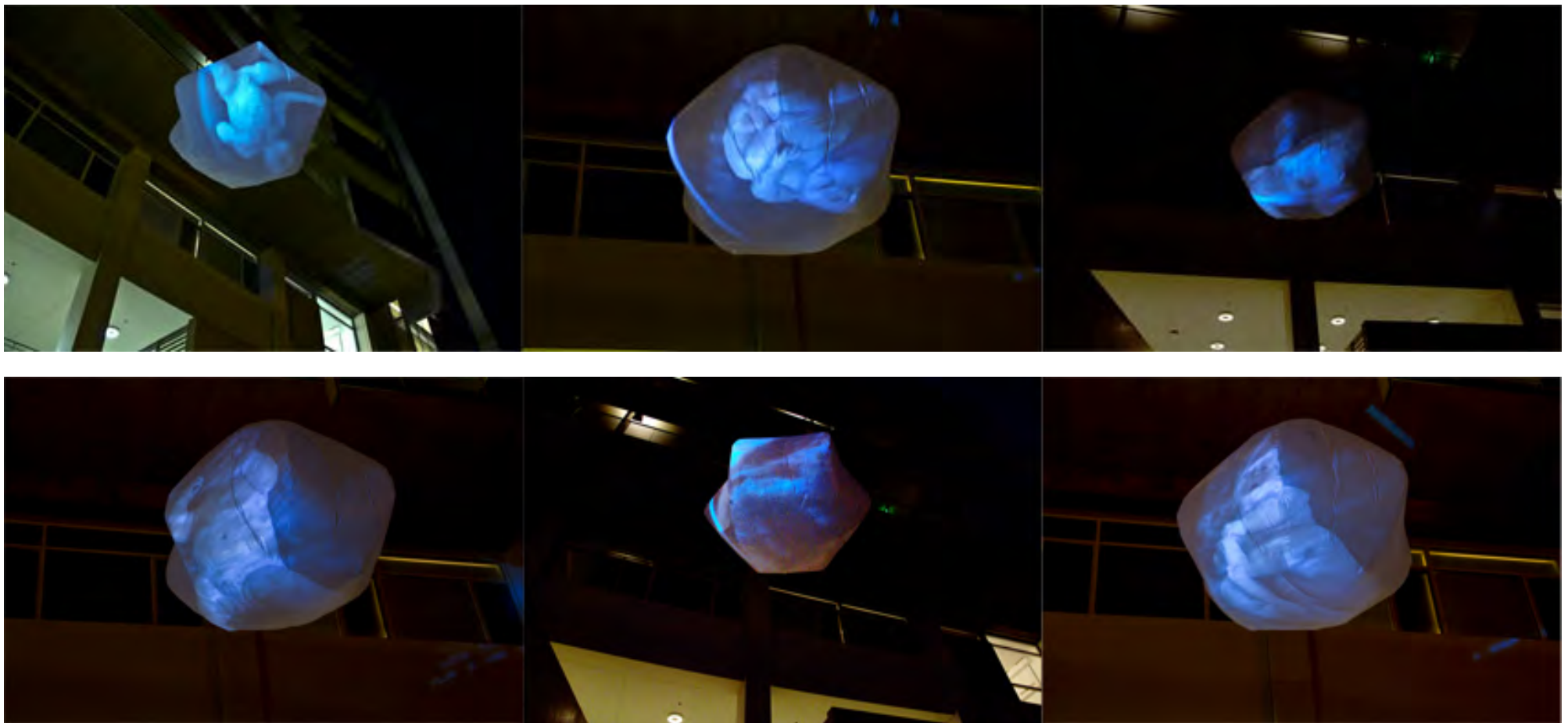
the entropy processes in the universe, is the original runback of energy that is accumulating on Earth and is carried out into space while the creative act of humans can “kindle” consciousness and concentrate intellectual and emotional energy and to create the individual power fields of space and time. Through a new method of communicative visual media, the Genesis project articulates the various readings that are modeled and refers to the conflict between power immorality and responsibility for the genetic fund of the country, to economic, ecological, demographic, and migration issues, and to the ethical problem of resource sharing.

The Genesis project uses a real-time data stream to monitor new births, which triggers changes in the projected video images. Images of babies are displayed from a data base that was compiled from families around the world.

The image changes every 2 minutes in New York, every 20 minutes in New Mexico, every 1.5 minutes in Ukraine, and, on average, every 1 minute in California. Thus the Genesis project produces unique installations in each region of the world where it has been installed. Every birth echoes with an audio splash obtained from an ultrasound scan of human arteries.

The documentation of the Genesis project is on display at Art | Sci Centre CNSI Gallery at UCLA from March 10 to 31. Presenting the project as a prototype without the real-time data stream allows it to reveal another layer that refers to the fact that the technologies being used in this project were developed to gather data and facilitate military targeting in war. It was not developed to stream data about life or births. So, the project can also articulate an anti-war message.

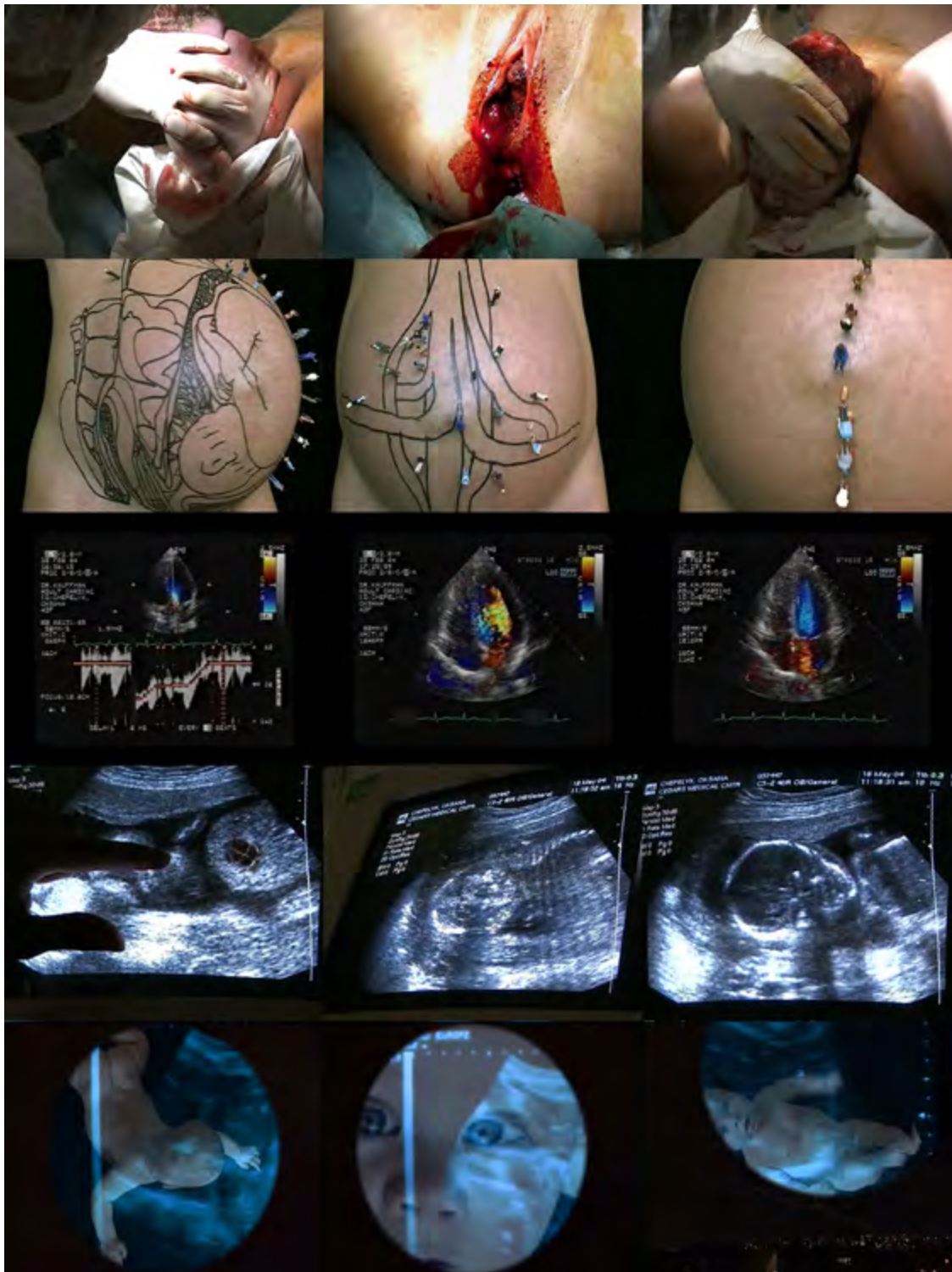
The project also examines the woman’s body in a multidimensional micro/macro reading. The curved lines of the body reveal its consonance with the Ukrainian *pysanka*, a philosophical symbol of “origin.” The photographs (shown here) feature contemporary ornaments, consisting of tattoos and mise-en-scène played out on the body of a pregnant woman. These allude to civilizational and existential catastrophes. The miniature people on the surface of the mother’s belly-sphere form an image of the field of civilization on planet Earth. My film “Chronicles of Fortinbras” film, which employs a feminist discourse, is based on the essay collection of the same title by Oksana Zabuzhko, author of the autobiographical prose work entitled *Field Research on Ukrainian Sex* (1996). The film interprets the writer’s view of national consciousness in a timeless cultural environ-



ment with an associative fabric of words and expressive images. The imaginary mythological space of the studied phenomenon is constructed from metaphorical actions and performances, assemblages of past events and excerpts from historical films. It depicts wide-ranging manipulations with the female body that consequentially loses its one-time attributes. Endeavoring to begin everything anew, the body, in the shape of a social fabric, moves beyond

the boundaries of its ontologically characteristic functions. It thus also evokes Shevchenko's approach to the female essence, represented by the female body (the body of culture), tormented and desecrated here by repugnant figures. In the words of Mary Kelly, "in the history of art Oedipus's dramas unfold between fathers and sons—on the body of mother."<sup>10</sup> The latter symbolizes male totality—the source of the Ukraine's passive fate, both past and present.

And so the culmination of the Genesis project, which works from the micro/macro symbols of "origin," is a *pysanka* on a global scale. A *pysanka* is a Ukrainian Easter egg, decorated using a wax-resist method. The word comes from *pysaty*, "to write," as the designs are not painted on but written with beeswax. At the Israel Museum, there is Bereshit aleph, or the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, written on an egg.



This project also turns to the global problem of surrogate motherhood. Surrogacy is a reproductive technique in which a woman agrees to become pregnant and bear a child with the intention of ultimately giving it up to be raised by others who will legally be regarded as the child's parents. The implementation of such a method of reproduction is tied to many issues of ethical, medical, and legal character and has posed a dilemma for humanity—to solve the problem of infertility or to exploit women as paid incubators, which is illegal according to the Brussels Declaration of the World Medical Association (1985). Surrogate motherhood is illegal in Austria, Norway, Sweden, France, some states of the U.S., Italy, Switzerland, and Germany (in Germany this assistance to infertile parents is outlawed because of its “amorality”). Commercial surrogate motherhood is an emotionally charged topic that is described with such potentially offensive expressions as “wombs for rent” or “baby farms” and addresses such factors as market, rent of the body, payment for services, profits, and raw materials. On a commercial basis, it is allowed in most states of the U.S., South Africa, India, Russia, Georgia, and Ukraine. How should we regard the “baby on order” who is tied to its surrogate mother through its umbilical cord for nine months and through emotional ties that, once it comes time



to give the child to its new parents, are torn in a most cruel and painful way?

My three-screen video installation includes “Origin”, “Pulse\_Life” (with 2D and 3D sonography), and “Birth” video works. Bill Viola’s well-known installation of a heart operation—where the artist slows down the beating of the heart until it stops and then restarts over and over—explores the relation between life and death. My “Birth” video deals with life through out the pain of birth. In it, the public sphere dissolves into private.<sup>11</sup> The video raises questions about the ownership of the placenta: is it the mother, who is pays for delivery, or the doctor or corporations, for which it is very valuable material for industry? So, in this way the project is an agent for developing a zone of resistance.

In these videos, real-time live 3D (4D) sonography provides a view of the fetus in motion. By removing the sonographic images from the zone of technology and, thus, of reproduction of image and returns it into zone of unic representation—and becomes a reminder of the uniqueness of each human being. Thus, the platonic forms are developed through linkage to diverse art communities. The process could lead towards exclusion—by going beyond the basic reflective/playful type of work affirmed by postmodernism—but, through systematic data visualisation, the project disseminates a disturbance and, according to Akile Bonito Oliva, starts to transmit impulses to



the atrophic center of the viewer's perception/sensitivity.<sup>12</sup>

Our time may be remembered in the history of humanity as the era of manipulation, which is gradually destroying the border between the artificial and the real, the natural and the constructed. The issue here is not only in the unlimited possibilities of contemporary technologies but in their seeming capability to uproot those basic existential grounds out of which human life has been growing for thousands of years, those which define its fundamental values.

This project is precisely about this: the value of a human being, "new forms of maternity" through which the female body in the condition of surrogate motherhood becomes a sort of "container for breeding human material," the danger of life without that most important love—that of a mother and child—without which the world could completely lose its sense of existence.<sup>13</sup> State politics—in the words of Michel Foucault, distinguishes itself today through its ability to "force one to live and allow one to die"—is taking on the markings of the very "biopolitics"<sup>14</sup> that ensure the survival of the human race—the masses—and doesn't see, notice, or hear the individual person. According to Foucault, "the authority does not simply exist, it functions as a matrix of transformations."<sup>15</sup> Emphasizing this dangerous opposition is the conceptual element of the project expressed through a documentary video of actual delivery with blood, pain, physical suffering, and the first cry of newborn life. What

role remains for art nowadays: a mirror of the problem, an avenue for social therapy, a project for a new reality, or the personal response of the author whose live emotion is capable of being heard over the buzz of global information? This project does not give instructions or prescribe action but asks questions about social space, the social body, the code of existence and life of human beings. For me, science challenges the artist, the artist challenges science. The third culture will occur when together they challenge authority to turn toward humanity.<sup>16</sup>

**Oksana Chepelyk is Fulbright Visiting Scholar in Design I Media Arts at the UCLA School of the Arts. Her work explores the relations between gender, space, information flows by combining migration and social issue with economic, ecological, and demographic problems.**

## Notes

1. Nicolas Bourriaud. *Esthetique relationnelle*. Dijon: Les Presses du reel, 2001.
2. Grant Kester. *Conversation Pieces: Communication and Community in Modern Art*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004.
3. Douglas Harper. *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Retrieved 2011-02-06.
4. James Strong. *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*.
5. Joseph Beuys. Statement dated 1973, first published in English in Caroline Tisdall, *Art into Society, Society into Art*. London: ICA, 1974, p. 48. Capitals in original.
6. Carlos Basualdo EXPERIMENTAL COMMUNITIES [WWW документ]. – Доступний з: <http://www.amaze.it/en/mast/goingc/why/1.htm>.
7. Giorgio Agamben and Michael Hardt (Translator). "The Coming Community" *Theory Out of Bounds, Vol. 1*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

8. В.И.Вернадский, Биосфера и ноосфера, М: «Наука», 1989, стр. 235.
9. William J. Mitchell. *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992.
10. Mary Kelly. Post-Partum Document. London: Routledge, 1985.
11. Diane Armitage. *THE Magazine*, #12 (2007) p. 27. Santa Fe, NM.
12. Акилле Бонито Олива. Искусство между идентичностью и гомогенностью // "Художественный журнал", за матеріалами лекції Акілле Боніто Оліва в Державному центрі сучасного мистецтва (Москва) 28.05.2004. В основу російського тексту ліг переклад Валерія Серовського. – М.: «ЖЖ», 2004, № 56. – стр. 32-35.
13. Halyna Sklyarenko. "Forced to Live" or "Babies on Order." *Genesis*. Exh. cat. K: Triada, 2008.
14. Фуко Мишель. ВОЛЯ К ИСТИНЕ: по ту сторону знания, власти и сексуальности. Работы разных лет. Пер. с франц.— М., Касталь, 1996.— 448 с.
15. М. Рыклин. "Сексуальность и власть: антирепрессивная гипотеза Мишеля Фуко" // Логос N5, 1994, с. 196 – 205.
16. C. P. Snow. *The Two Cultures*. Cambridge: University Press., 1960 (2nd ed. 1993), p. 181.