

Olga Majcen Linn*

Bureau of Contemporary Art Praxis – KONTEJNER, Zagreb, Croatia

**Book Review: William Myers, *Bio Art – Altered Realities*.
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The fact that a prominent British publisher has dedicated two richly appointed editions to the intersection of art and science proves that such progressive genres have entered the art world with a bang. The first is the work of a passionate Californian chronicler of fusions between sciences and technologies: Stephen Wilson's *Art + Science Now* demonstrates that scientific research and technological innovation have become a crucial element of 21st century aestheticism. Published in 2010, the book contributes to a broader understanding of art and science, and is both a sound introduction to those unfamiliar and a handy overview for those well acquainted with this type of art. The other book, *Bio Art – Altered Realities* is a treatise on bio art by William Myers, whose previous book, *BioDesign Nature + Science + Creativity* was dedicated to design and published by Thames & Hudson in cooperation with MOMA, New York in 2012.

In his preface of the book *Bio Art – Altered Realities*, Myers emphasizes the difference between bio-design and bio-art, referring to a debate that often arises regarding creative achievements based on biology and other sciences concerning living organisms. According to his definition, bio-design integrates biological processes and living materials into graphic and product design, or architecture, while bio-art either utilizes biology as an artistic medium or seeks to alter the meaning of biology in its outcome. In the 21st century, as the 'golden age' of biology, dramatic extinction of numerous species, climatic change, and the destruction of habitats of various animals have resulted in a crisis of conscience that inspires artists. Myers argues that the Anthropocene epoch is the main subject of art projects in the field of bio-art. The Anthropocene is an age on which the scientific community has not yet reached a consensus: the era of human domination, the breeding of domestic animals, manufacture of plastic materials, and environmental pollution, which replaced the Holocene as a period of stable climate after the last ice age some 12,000 years ago.

Titled "Bioart and the Gnawing Invisible", the introductory chapter features a less-than-representative selection of artists, making it the weakest part of the book. Locating the roots of bio-art in Surrealism and the art of Nam June Paik and Mathew

*Author contact information: omajcen@gmail.com

Barney, Myers attempts a historical explanation of this type of art as one not defined exclusively through its medium, namely the use of living organisms, but also through its reinventing and shifting our concept of ourselves and the definitions of life, nature, and community – whereby he alludes to the link between the discovery of psychoanalysis and Surrealism, connecting it to bio-art and the present historical moment. Thereby he seems to have forgotten that the medium is indeed essential in bio-art, since it transfers the crucial issues from the field of aesthetics to that of ethics. One may here paraphrase Eduardo Kac, who once said that Picasso, Jackson Pollock, and Andy Warhol (and I believe that Dalí would fit into his list as well) were not really helpful concerning his own art, since he was not creating objects, but subjects, which required a completely different type of responsibility. What is missing from this introduction is therefore a clarification of the terminology and notions, such as bio-art, transgenic art, genetic art, moist media art, life science art, biotech art, wetware, and so on.

The book is divided into four additional chapters – four clusters of topics that, according to the author, concern the authors of bio-art. The first bears the title “Altering Nature, Naturally” and a motto quoting Jenny Holzer: “Use what is dominant in a culture and change it quickly”.

Bio-art is frequently accused of perversity. Indicating some historical moments, such as the melting icebergs and the great floods in the age of the first agricultures, interpreted in people’s minds as divine punishment for interfering with nature, Myers explains the concept of nature and perversity in a way suitable for the general public, interpreting both notions in terms of cultural constructs of particular historical moments or geographic areas. In his opinion, new technologies open up many doors – each of them leading to some dark room of possible futures – and bio-artists use their talent to carve windows and shed light on the possible consequences, helping people to position themselves accordingly. An interesting case illustrating this chapter is an artwork of Arne Hendriks *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, a spectacular project consisting of an entire eco-system, text, illustrations, and objects presuming a reduction of human height to some 50 cm. The artist has thereby considered the consequences this might have for the world in general, including the fact that the human race would reduce its consumption to only 2% of the present value.

In addition to Hendriks, other artists featured in this section include Vincent Fournier, Azuma Makoto, Next Nature Network, Maja Smrekar, the Center for Post-Natural History, the Center for Genomic Gastronomy, Kate MacDowell, Suzanne Anker, Neri Oxman, Patricia Piccinini, Carole Collet, Eduardo Kac, Driessend & Verstappen, Jalila Essaidi, and Katrin Schoof – all of whom Myers considers as Surrealists creating chimeras of the future.

The next chapter, “Redefining Life” features a quotation by Hannah Landecker as a motto. Biotechnology changes the meaning of a biological being, according to Wythe Marschall, a contributing author to the volume. Marschall reflects on the changeability of the definition of life in the course of the history of philosophy and

of biological sciences. In the modern world of tissue cultures, clones, and robots, it has also become inapplicable to many new forms of life. Moreover, our definition of life has a great impact on laws, economy, and other aspects of human culture. Bio-art, evolving in parallel to bio-technologies, no longer raises ontological questions – what is life? – but rather ethical ones: how do we treat these new forms of life, to what extent do we experience them as commodities, or what do we owe to the other, be that ‘other’ living or non-living? Along with artworks focusing on new laboratory achievements, there are many dealing with environmental issues. However, bio-artworks regarding the environment are different than earlier artistic currents such as landscape painting, land art, and alike, since bio-art demonstrates additional interest for the industrial exploitation of the environment. An interesting example is the work of the BLC collective, consisting of Shijo Fukuhara, Georg Tremmel, Yuki Yoashioka, and Philipp Boening. Concerned with the social implications of the rapid evolvement of bio-technologies, these artists have subversively reacted to the first genetically modified flower to become commercially accessible in Japan, made in Columbia and globally distributed by the Japanese beverage producer Suntory. The collective produced chives, called *Moondust*, in home laboratories using tissue cultures of a genuine genetically-modified flower, after which they distributed and planted them in landscape, drawing attention to the problem of copyright when it comes to genetic creations, as well as the related problem of bio-piracy.

In addition to BLC, this section features Uli Westphal, Yves Gellie, Henrik Spohler, Antti Laitinen, Guisepe Licari, Špela Petrić, Mark Dion, Maarten Vanden Eynde, Boo Chapple, Rachel Sussman, Nikki Romanello, Mara Haseltine, and Alexis Rockman.

The chapter on “Visualizing Scale and Scope” cites the motto: “Art is by definition an anthropological practice [...] what art does is to reveal hidden, undisclosed, unarticulated codes within a culture [...] to find a new form for something which is known but not fully understood.” Visualizing data in terms of converting them into experience is a 21st century trend. Since the earliest geographic maps and the first satellite image of the Earth, visualizations have been the most dramatic means of making information understandable. With progress in microscopy, genetic analysis, synthesis, astronomic analysis, and algorithm rendering, visualizations have gained additional importance as they make it possible for a wider audience to understand complex information. When the Apollo 8 mission’s photographs of Earth were shown to the public, depicting it as a solitary blue sphere floating in vast space, it changed the general attitude towards the planet and indirectly triggering the endorsement of ending nuclear experiments. According to Myers, artists in search of such powerful and contextualizing images or visualizations include Thought Collider, Saša Spačal, Drew Berry, Bio Visualisations, Sonja Baumel, Heather Barnett, Pei Ying Lin, Kathy High, Gail Wight, Julian Voss-Andreae, and Robbie Anson Duncan. Another is Heather Dewey Hagborg. In her project *Stranger Visions*, she collected chewed bubble gum and cigarette butts, extracting genetic material from them, which she then analyzed in

the laboratory. Using the techniques of forensic DNA phenotyping and 3D printing, she recreated the faces of casual passers-by who had left their genetic material behind via the aforementioned litter. Issues of genetic surveillance, threats to privacy, and easy access to our genomes are at the core of her work.

In his chapter on “Experimental Identities and Media”, Myers draws a new parallel between bio-art and Surrealism. The Surrealists were greatly inspired by drawings produced by children and madmen, since these did not fit into the systems of acceptable social values and resorted to automatic writing, drugs, or sleep deprivation in order to achieve the authenticity of free creation. Myers is of the opinion that living organisms are for the bio-artists what madmen and children were for the Surrealists, since we live in the era of intense environmental pollution.

For bio-artists, it is a challenge to rethink the established narrative related to the notion of ‘the other’, whereby they are interested in complex behaviors, interdependences, or sophistication of other beings, which in fact show far more similarities to human beings when viewed through such a prism. Artists of this category include Jon McCormack, Brian Knep, Julia Lohman, Ollie Palmer, Kuai Shen, Elaine Whitaker, Dana Sherwood, Raul Ortega, Zeger Reyers, Philip Beesley, Angelo Vermeulen, Raphael Kim, Burton Nitta, Anna Dumitriu, Chatlotte Jarvis, Studio PSK, and Ai Hesagawa. A particularly interesting example is the project of Studio PSK called *The Economics of Evolution: The Perfect Pigeon*. Having taken the pigeon as the basis for their research (since that species had been used since Roman times as a decorative object, stuffed bird, for entertainment, or to carry mail) they developed a vision of how the pigeon could evolve in the future. The pigeon of tomorrow may carry information as well, but as a ‘biological postman’, with information inscribed into its body on the genetic level, as an employee of bio-technological companies protecting their intellectual property.

In his acknowledgments, Myers indicates that the book would have been impossible without the support of the editors, who have taken something of a risk by engaging an author who is primarily dedicated to design for writing a book on art. Here he unwittingly pinpoints the main problem of his book.

Although engaging, informative and attractive (with strong examples of presenting complex projects in concise, easily comprehended terms), Myers’ book falls short of the standard set by other Thames & Hudson editions. Intended for the general, often first-time audiences, these books merge high production values with nearly encyclopedic content structures. Not so with Myers’ volume, which lacks the comprehensiveness of subject expected of a book of its title. Myers omits a series of names that were indeed constitutive for the field, such as the Portuguese artist Marta de Menezes, who in addition to her own artworks coordinates two large projects, *Cultivamos Cultura* and *Ectopia*, through which she organizes global residences, exhibitions, festivals, and conferences dedicated exclusively to bio-art. Also absent in Myers’ text is *Tissue Culture and Art*, an Australian group of artists and scientists who were the first to launch experiments in tissue engineering and to conduct a regular residential

program for artists at the University of Perth. Many others have been omitted as well: Paul Vanouse, Critical art Ensemble, Beatriz da Costa, Joe Davis, and George Gessert are only some pioneers of this discipline who did not find their place in this book.

In his foreword, Myers states that he was interested in expanding the definition of bio-art from the narrow field of biology as a medium to the relationship between culture and science, i.e. from medium to content, and this book has succeeded in doing that. Nevertheless, among the featured artists is a disproportionate prevalence of those using the media of painting, photography, and sculpture in contrast to those using biology. This is particularly true for chapter dedicated to the environment, and chapter concerned with visualizations. The work of Julian Voss-Andreae, who creates metal sculptures to illustrate scientific concepts that are difficult to visualize and who can hardly be considered as a bio-artist, is only one among numerous examples.

Myers' reference list for further reading likewise omits some crucial authors who have helped coin the terminology, curated the first exhibitions of bio-art, or published reviews. All in all, this book has not exhausted the topic of bio-art by far and I believe that it will inspire numerous experts to write their own overviews.