

IASS 2004 Art, the Body a. Biotechnology (7.-12.7.04, Lyon)

Ingeborg Reichle

Codes As Cultural Signs

8. th. Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS), 7.-12. July 2004 Lyon

Sessions on visual semiotics organised by the IAVS in Lyon, July 2004

Globalised society as a society of pictures

Within the framework of VIIIth congress of the IASS, the IASV organises, in collaboration with the IASS, a series of sessions on visual semiotics on the topic "Globalised society as a society of pictures". To the extent that there has recently been an evolution of the modes of exchange and representation of the world, and of the institutional as well as the political strategies derived from them, pictures and other visual signs undoubtedly have made an important contributions towards this change. Within the frames of the VIIIth congress of the IASS., the topic of which will be interculturality and globalisation, the IASV invites the semioticians involved with visuality to reflect on what images as well as theirs study have to offer to our current understanding of the world, not only within the aesthetic dimension, but also from the cognitive, anthropological, cultural, and even economic and political, point of view.

Information:

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505 - Tables rondes (5/6.Sémiotique des pratiques esthétiques) Art, the Body& Biotechnology: Reading (Genetic) Codes As Cultural Signs Art, corps et biotechnologies : lire les codes (génétique) comme des signes Co-chairs / responsables : Marga van Mechelen, Ernestine Daubner

Abstract of Round Table: How has biotechnology transformed conceptions of the body and other natural organisms? How have genetic engineering techniques that manipulate biological bodies altered our conception of nature and culture? Bio-(tech) art, an emerging art form, encompassing genetic art, transgenic art, clone art, cell art and other genres, addresses these issues in challenging ways. Eradicating the separation between art and life, such live art practice effectively serves to decode the manner in which art and (bio)technology operate as cultural signs. In this session, we wish to examine the semiotic and epistemological dimensions of the new (micro-)biological bodies produced by bio-(tech) art and science, and particularly how (genetic and cultural) codes relate to: cultural inscriptions of the body; the relation between nature and culture and its affect on the search for what Rheinberger calls "Begrifflichkeit; traditional aesthetics and art discourse; theories of post-structuralism, post-phenomenology, post-humanism and to post-modern theories of the cyborg as a transcending condition of fluidity, of open-endedness, and slipping boundaries.

PRESENTERS Co-Chairs: Marga van Mechelen, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands Ernestine Daubner, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

Participants: (in alphabetical order) Suzanne Anker, School of Visual Arts, New York, Biotechnica Shawn Bailey & Jennifer Willet, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada Dalia Chauveau, Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada Christine Palmieri, Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada, Ingeborg Reichle, Humboldt University Berlin, Germany, Miriam van Rijnsing, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

ABSTRACTS

Ernestine Daubner, Concordia University (co-chair)

When Art & Biotechnology Meet: The Semiotics of Chimeras & Other Monsters

/ La rencontre de l'art et de la biotechnologie : la sémiotique des chimères et autres monstres

For over a century now, the visual arts have challenged traditional categories of art, its aesthetic function, as well as the role of the artist and the viewer. Body art is a case in point. When the artist's performative flesh entered the art arena, the body became both signifier and signified, both object and sign. At the same time, the body became a battleground, serving, for example, to repudiate representational conventions, cultural inscriptions of gender and ethnicity, as well as aesthetic and Enlightenment conceptions of the body. Recent techno-performances have disrupted semiotic and cultural codes once again: this time, by introducing the object-body (of science) into the realm of art. The fusion of a reified body with technologies embodies a posthuman cyborgian condition that counters the very conception of the body posited, for centuries, by the Humanities. In this light, one may ask how

emerging biotechnological art practices relate to such a cyborgian condition; and whether the diverse 'live' artworks, currently being created, similarly dismantle humanistic inscriptions of the body, of nature, indeed of 'life' itself. Certainly, one can say that the new 'living' bioengineered art creations conflate artistic and scientific codes. However, by employing tissue and genetic engineering as well as other biotechnologies, artists bring very different kinds of 'living' entities into the realm of art: chimeras, clones, monstrous living tissue, and other mutable and regenerative (microbiological) bodies. But how do these 'living' entities, engendered from the marriage of art and science, operate semiotically? In this presentation I will consider this question by examining specific examples of biotech art. I will illustrate that, once born into an artistic domain, these brave new 'living' entities have the ability to escape their purely scientific codes: breeding, multiplying, proliferating, and freely mutating into a myriad of cultural signs.

Ingeborg Reichle, Humboldt University Berlin

Pandora's Box ? Genetic Engineering in Contemporary Art

Contemporary approaches to art and biology reveal to us today again the complex relationship between art and science, especially the use of controversial technologies like genetic engineering. In the last two decades we have seen a number of artists who left the traditional artistic playground to work instead in scientific contexts, like the laboratories of molecular biologists. In this paper I will critically explore the new artform Transgenic Art and I will show how this new art form both dramatically differs from artworks which explore art and genetics through the use of traditional media and how at the same time it reanimates myths about artists which were already formulated by art theorists in antiquity. My argument I will focus on works of artists like Eduardo Kac (Art Institute of Chicago) and the artists group SymbioticA (University of Western Australia). Central to these contemporary art works is the relationship between art and the central scientific paradigm of the genetic code, as well as the reflection about the technology of molecular biology and of bioinformatics. These artists create new life forms, new organisms which are more or less technofacts rather than natural organisms. But with the production of new organisms through art, it seems that artists again challenge the reception of what is art and what is nature.

Christine Palmieri, Université du Québec à Montréal

Enjeux sémiotiques des nouvelles représentations

Les arts biotechnologiques nous forcent à poser la question : Où finit le vivant et où commence l'artifice ? Ils proposent de nouvelles représentations du monde en inventant non plus de nouvelles fictions mais de possibles réalités jusque-là fantasmées. Devant ces nouvelles uvres

qui manipulent autant le vivant que l'intelligence artificielle tout se joue entre l'apparence et l'apparaître, entre la monstration et la révélation dans l'équation complexe de l'irrationalité rationalisée. Devant l'effondrement de ces frontières et devant ces uvres qui semblent éliminer le mode représentationnel au profit d'un mode direct, comment appréhender tout signe esthétique communicationnel. Ma pratique artistique, se présentant sous forme de labo, met sous observation ce monde en devenir par le biais d'un être fictionnel, un professeur de dernière génération d'hybrides ou de chimères du futur. Avec lui nous essaierons de voir comment appréhender sémiotiquement certaines de ces pratiques.

Dalia Chauveau, Université du Québec à Montréal

L'agence de clonage Dalia Chauveau, une mise en pratique de la construction d'une image de soi.

Comment l'agence de clonage Dalia Chauveau, une uvre en arts médiatiques, par sa conceptualisation structurelle et thématique, peut permettre la création d'un lieu où l'art et l'interactivité servent d'éléments déclencheurs à l'amorce d'une réflexion au sujet des biotechnologies par la mise en pratique d'une construction d'une image de soi désirée et fabriquée de toutes pièces ? À la lumière des enjeux esthétiques contemporains, cette recherche artistique tend à susciter un questionnement épistémologique et cette présentation aura pour but de mettre en lumière sa structuration esthétique et perceptive. Ce besoin de saisir le réel dans toutes ses manifestations et de l'articuler est très ancien. Ce même besoin alimente les pratiques des artistes qui travaillent la thématique des biotechnologies. Il ne s'agit plus de saisir le réel, mais de saisir des réels possibles, à venir, invisibles ou amorcés et de les déconstruire. Les mises en formes diffèrent d'un artiste à l'autre. Certains adoptent une approche de création à partir de la matière organique biologique, d'autres l'orchestration d'une mise en scène participative, fictive et critique, suite à laquelle les participants vivent une expérience qui servira de moteur à un débat et/ou à une réflexion. D'autres optent pour une approche contemplative dans le but de provoquer une réflexion à propos d'un devenir post-biotechnologique par le biais de la mise en image d'une manipulation. Dans ce contexte, mon travail se situe entre deux approches. Il conjugue une approche relationnelle, intimiste, menant à une représentation imagée d'un soi post-manipulation, qui découlerait de cette expérience interactive. Cette présentation aura pour objectif de voir comment cette uvre se situe dans ce contexte et quelle est sa dynamique symbolique, à la jonction entre l'esthétique et la psychanalyse. Quelle est la portée du débat social qu'elle engendre ? Quelles sont les racines de ce désir de fabrication de soi qu'elle suscite ? À quoi réfère cette image d'un soi idéalisé qu'elle met de l'avant ? Le miroir interactif artistique

peut-il, dans ce contexte, servir de lieu de réflexion à propos du regard porté sur soi et à propos des enjeux biotechnologiques ?

Biotechnica (Shawn Bailey & Jennifer Willet) Concordia University

3D Organic Tissue Prototypes (Soft Sculptures)

BIOTEKNICA is a fictitious corporation, which explores notions of reproduction and self/other distinctions in relation to evolving biotechnologies. BIOTEKNICA projects its viewers into the future, where within our virtual laboratory designer organisms are generated on demand. However, the organisms produced by BIOTEKNICA do not adhere to the structures and functionality normally manifest in nature. Similar to mutations depicted in *The Fly* and *Aliens* our specimens are irrational and grotesque. They are modeled on the Teratoma, an unusual cancerous growth containing multiple human tissues like hair, skin and teeth. Monstrous as this seems, scientists today are conducting research on the Teratoma with the goal of developing future therapeutic cloning technologies. BIOTEKNICA both embraces and critiques these technologies, considering the contradictions and deep underlying complexities of contemporary biotechnologies role in the future of humanity. In the past, BIOTEKNICA has been a purely Multimedia production; however, we seek to bring our theoretical specimens out of their virtual environment and into the laboratory. We have been invited to work as Research Fellows at the SymbioticA Art/Science Laboratories at The University of Western Australia in the summer of 2004, where we will grow organic prototypes that will serve as new representations of our product line. Here, we wish to develop soft sculptures that tip the scales between representation and reality, based on tissues cultivated under the supervision of scientists further contributing to the complexities and social discourses that arise from our project.

Marga van Mechelen, University of Amsterdam (co-chair)

Infectious or immune? The semiotic systems of medical science and art
One way in which the indexical sign was traditionally illustrated was by means of red spots as the symptoms of measles. In major viral illnesses, such visual signs usually remain hidden from view, however. The theory of symptoms was originally an important semiotic discipline within medical science, but its importance has been diminished first by X-ray technology and now even more emphatically by the diagnostic possibilities of new scan technologies that visualize our internal body. When we consider the diagnostic value of MRI scans, we base ourselves on the authority of the scan as an advanced iconic sign, a so-called hard icon (Tomas Maldonado), and not as an indexical sign. The semiotic system of scans seems to coincide with the return of the first approach to photography (as iconic sign) that stands in opposition to the notion of photography as indexical sign, stressed since the eighties (amongst others by Dubois and J.M. Schaeffer). I wish to consider whether contemporary cultural productions

in the field of art, the body and biotechnology follow the same direction as the developments in medical science and photography at least the way I have presented them so far. In what respect(s) do they relate to each other, and if they do not, why not? How do sign systems, sign productions, intentionality and objectives interrelate? I will investigate these questions by an analysis of a few examples taken from the scientific and artistic production examined by participants of the round table.

Miriam van Rijnsing, University of Amsterdam

Visual Genomics - Material Script: reading material identities

In my paper I will address the issue of material identity as it is engineered in both the genetic and the artistic lab. Both labs develop new representational spaces in which Nature and Culture collapse (Rheinberger) or Nature and Culture are considered as techniques of the living of life (Haraway, Hayles). More specifically: in these new representational spaces new ways of understanding the signifying dynamics of data and matter, information and biology, code and body are proclaimed (e.g. Thacker). But how are we to understand these new signifying dynamics? And what do they reveal exactly? As an example I will focus on the dynamics of the new artistic/biotech portrait. Three categories are under scrutiny: portraits using in vitro technology; portraits using genetic sequencing; and portraits using tissue technology-producing synthetic genes.

Suzanne Anker, School of Visual Arts, New York

Digital Darwinism and the Molecular Gaze

Picturing DNA, avatar of twentieth century molecules, to a general audience is an act of blind faith. Rendered exclusively through instrumentation and intellectual grasp, the subdivisible entity is the matrix of all known life. Aside from scientific data, the optical gaze reveals structure while creating spectacular visual worlds through the medium of the microscope, crystallography, sequencing gels, magnetic imaging et al. The ways in which DNA is visualized and comprehended as a system of signs assumes many complex patterns which bring into focus questions regarding biological metaphor and its role in the visual arts. In addition to the informational values of these scientific icons, the attendant cultural dimensions of genetic imaging and processing continues to penetrate visual culture at large. What are genetic icons, symbols and indices? How do molecular metaphors reinforce the development of visual art's particular practice and history? Trial hypothesis, curios of data and experiments of repeatability, identify empiricism's system of inquiry, the scientific method. Through an analysis of matter's underlying phenomena, this system establishes rules of entry whereby procedure and product are mathematically steered. This program's coherence disallows interlopers of any kind. It is a regime of

rationalist obsession, a to and fro between process and probability. In this monogamous affair, the rules are consistency, persistency and faithfulness. Is such an immutable entity, a constant, possible within the practice of visual art? Or does spectacle and style prohibit such a proposition? Formed by fluctuating guises which significantly underscore different historical, ahistorical and post-historical propositions, the practice of art, none-the-less consistently relies on transforming material into metaphor. In deciphering the molecular gaze as it impinges on digital Darwinism, five themes concurrently operating within this domain will be referenced: 1) the reduction of the body to code-script of information, 2) mutation, manipulation and monsters as a form of the new grotesque 3) the blurring of boundaries through chimeras and transgenics, 4) reprotect and the breeding of better babies, 5) commodification and the sale of genetic substances. Each theme will be explored through visual art.

Reference:

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