

The gallery reconfigured: *BioDifference: The Political Ecology*

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Ken Rinaldo's *Augmented Fish Reality* (USA) is not indicative of the *BioDifference* exhibition, yet there exists within both an austerity uncommon to art galleries; an austerity unlike one previously experienced.

Augmented Fish Reality is a set of 3 fish bowls, each bowl on an its own identical rolling aluminium sculpture. At the base of the sculpture is a compartment containing a wet cell battery. Wires extend upwards connected to a device that senses the movements of a Siamese fighting fish in each bowl. There is a miniature camera in one of the bowls although this cannot be seen. What can be seen is a murky projection on the rear gallery wall of participants as they transgress the primitive circle of rock that encloses the 3 sculptures, interact with the Siamese fighting fish and activate a motor contained within each sculpture, allowing for its movement by fish response to colours, particularly yellow. This intersection of art and science transforms the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery into a space resembling a research laboratory.

Rinaldo's sculptures blur the distinction between the natural and the artificial, but there is about the work a sense of servility. Are robotics augmenting the life of a Siamese Fighting Fish, or vice versa? Donna Franklin's *Fibre Reactive*, cloth used as a medium for living fungi to create a fashion item, is harmonious in its representation of the parasitical relationship between the organic and inorganic. Unlike Ken Rinaldo's fish and robot, the materials used to create *Fibre Reactive* are co-dependent. Fungi and cloth exist to create an object beyond the sum of its parts—a dress, which would not exist without the dependent relationship that preceded its creation. Yet this mutual relationship between cloth and fungi must occur within a controlled environment. Fungi will only survive within a particular temperature range, resulting in the dress encased within a perspex cube. Once again, science intervenes, and the result is an ornamental archive, a living dress that has died, a decomposing figurine that perpetuates the decomposition of the gallery space as it has been previously known. Art's deathroll momentarily captured within a museum designed to show visitors what the gallery experience was like, as opposed to the time capsule it has become.

Polona Tratnik's *Private Microbes* transforms the body into a shattered archaeological relic. Body casts made from a material resembling buffed bone contain micro-organisms obtained from the artist's own body. Unlike *Fibre Reactive*, the glass cabinet containing these artificial body parts does not perform a scientific function. It exists purely as a method for displaying a body that once was, but has since become a commodity. Organic life is reduced to its microscopic starting point and forms part of an item to be consumed; much like jewellery in a department store. From research laboratory to archive, the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery resembles a mutated scientific institute complete with its own retail outlet. One in which the organic form, animal, vegetable and human, is researched, archived and commodified upon a production line that erupts in *Bioteknica*, a fictitious organisation that genetically modifies life and comes complete with its own brochure.

Visceral sculptures of genetic deformity, hybrids of internal organs, bone, teeth and strands of hair, repulse. Jennifer Willet and Shawn Bailey's accompanying brochure is arguably more shocking because of its cool scientific tone, its rationalisation of genetic mutation and the implication that these mutations are of benefit to scientific research and the general population.

The emergence of a fictitious organisation within this gallery of science seems entirely appropriate. Normally associated with the expression of aesthetic truths the gallery becomes a speculative arena. One in which fears and fantasies that cluster around genetic research, such as cloning, are unleashed. Perhaps not a theme, but an impulse present in Goya or Expressionism, Joyce or The Beats.

This exhibition was initially titled Bio Difference: Born and Bred. As BEAP evolved, somewhere, a transformation occurred. As for the desire by artists to engage with trends and issues within society by expressing themselves through objects of art, BioDifference is familiar. As is the adaptation and employment of new technology for artistic purposes. In one sense, the blow pipe and the micro chip are just separate advances on a technological continuum. The discovery of one method would have surprised and elated its users, refined and enhanced artistic activity, as much as the other. What is different about Bio Difference: The Political Ecology is that never before has society been confronted by the prospect of artificial life. The subtitle *Born and Bred*, in all its daring implications, nailed this proposition by succinctly expressing the potential for cynicism and greed to proliferate within the area of A-Life. Thankfully, the tendency toward euphemism did not extend to the BioDifference exhibition. It remained a disturbing critique of artificial life, the gallery, and art as commodity.

It seems appropriate to end a review of a speculative art form by speculating upon that art form. Initially, Biological Art will be resisted on ethical grounds in the same way cloning has been resisted. The thought of tampering with life itself, whether for the purpose of reproduction or for creating an object of beauty is perplexing, repugnant and frightful. It is also a terrifying possibility if not an actual reality. Biological Art will also be resisted as an art form in the same way painting upon canvas may have been resisted. Fear is the great friend of prejudice, but over time most fears fade into an historical ether.

Bio Difference: The Political Ecology was essentially about transporting the known into the unknown. It not only reconfigured the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery by laying to rest the idea of the gallery as a space in which to recuperate, it reconfigured art. *Bioteknika* encapsulated this spatial and artistic reconfiguration by the intrusion of a fictitious corporation capable of altering life, becoming just another form of art. The question facing Biological Art is this: in partnership with the corporate sector, government agencies and powerful education institutions, do those at the cutting edge of artistic practice have the independence of mind, artistic integrity and raw courage, to maintain a critique of this contentious issue; that of evolving and continuing to live by allowing a part of life to die. The works described here were not indicative of the entire exhibition, but several of the exhibits in Bio Difference: The Political Ecology and the euphemistic renaming of its subtitle revealed a wavering of intention.

BioDifference: The Political Ecology, curators Oron Catts, Ionat Zurr, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of West Australia. BEAP '04 Sept 12 - Oct 3

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