

A NON-ANTHROPO- CENTRIC UNDER- STANDING OF LIFE

Dominik Einfalt



Topic for the presentation for
momentum 2023

Bio Art

Living tissue as material for sculptures, a rabbit whose fur glows in the dark, butterflies whose wing patterns are genetically modified and an artist who injects herself with horse blood plasma; all of these artistic projects have caused a stir in recent years. They are just a few examples of Bioart, a movement in contemporary art that uses biological materials such as cells, tissues, organisms along with scientific procedures, protocols and tools to create art.

Bioartworks explore the boundaries between the living and the non-living, the organic and the inorganic, the relationship between the human and the non-human, and the various thresholds of the living.

A central concern within bioart frequently revolves around is critiquing anthropocentrism and how humans are dealing with non-human life (tissues, cells,...). However, there exists a potential paradox where, despite their intentions of rejecting anthropocentrism, artists wield authority over nonhuman entities. Non-human entities (mainly tissues, cells,...) often serve as the raw materials that undergo manipulation and even destruction in the pursuit of artistic expression.

In this way, the elements of biopower and biopolitics, as defined by Michel Foucault, are also shifted. Biopolitics is no longer concerned exclusively with human populations. Rather, it operates with technical-scientific means at the level of the materiality of life processes.



In the work "Wish you weren't here" we confronted the audience with the power of killing and started an intense animal rights debate, which ended in deep conversations with the messerli animal ethics institution and an invitation to show this work on a animal rights conference.

Wish you weren't here 2020
Dominik Einfalt, Noah von Stietencron

A new class for exploitation

From the perspective of environmental scientists, lab-grown meat appears to be a long-awaited alternative. In a global context where animal agriculture is responsible for a staggering 51% of greenhouse gas emissions¹, the field of bioengineered meat offers a ray of hope for substantial reductions in environmental impacts. According to findings by Hanna L. Tuomisto and M. Joost Teixeira de Mattos (2011), the cultivation of meat in a controlled laboratory setting has the potential to slash greenhouse gas emissions by an impressive 78-96%, drastically cut down land use by 99%, and significantly decrease water consumption by 82-96% when compared to traditional animal farming.

The media often downplay or ignore the ethical concerns surrounding lab-grown meat, and even animal rights activists such as Ingrid Newkirk from PETA presenting it enthusiastically as an “animal-friendly” alternative.² Nonetheless it’s important to recognize that cultivating animal tissue in a laboratory setting isn’t entirely devoid of ethical concerns.

Researcher envision the possibility of creating a synthetic or plant-based substitute for calf serum down the line. Nevertheless, it’s essential to remember that lab-grown meat is not ethically unblemished; it involves the death of animals. Specifically, fetal calf serum is derived from the blood of bovine fetuses extracted from slaughtered cows.

Currently, it is not possible to substitute the serum with a synthetic alternative, and this absence of an alternative doesn’t make the process cruelty-free as the suffering of unborn cows and their mothers remains concealed. In this context, it becomes intriguing to consider Alfred N. Whitehead’s concept of life as a form of “robbery.” This concept, on the relationship between the living and non-living underscores the idea, that every living entity also appropriates resources from other systems, both organic and inorganic, as a means of sustaining itself. For instance, when it requires food, it necessitates the disruption of complex societies derived from the environment³. The domain of the living encompasses numerous intertwined processes and alterations involving the manipulation of matter - both assembly and disintegration.

1 See: Goodland and Anhang 2009.

2 See: Newkirk 2013.

3 Whitehead 1978, 105

In their commentaries and works, artists associated with TC&A (The Tissue Culture & Art Project) underscore the idea that an unquestioning and unreflective vision of a utopia where all meat is lab-grown appears somewhat naive, human-centric, and aligned with the principles of capitalist consumerism. This approach involves shifting the violence to a less visible level by concealing the true victims. Furthermore, they propose that the widespread cultivation of semi-living entities through tissue culturing could give rise to a “new class open to exploitation,” as articulated by Catts and Zurr in 2006. In this new class, the exploited entities may not necessarily be fully developed, complex organisms but rather their components: cells and tissues.

The manipulation and manufacturing of the living like like cells, tissues, nucleic acids, and proteins, is already occurring in both scientific and industrial domains today so we might have to question whether the notion of a “new class for exploitation” envisioned by Catts and Zurr is a future scenario, or if it is a current reality.



Disembodied Cuisine - TC&A
2003 Oron Catts & Ionat Zurr

“Disembodied Cuisine,” an art project by TC&A, delves into the intersections of science, ethics, and our connection with food. As part of this project, individuals were invited to partake in a unique experience, dining frog steaks cultivated from frog cells grown beforehand. Adjacent to the dining table, where people enjoyed these frog steaks, there was a terrarium where the frogs observed those consuming steaks crafted from one of their own biopsy cells.



DIY DVK - TC&A

2006 Oron Catts & Ionat Zurr

The DIY De-victimiser is a device designed to help individuals cope with the guilt they may feel when consuming meat or when using technology to end the life of a living being. This kit includes a basic tissue culture setup used to sustain, and in some cases even prolong and expand, the existence of parts of deceased animal bodies. This performative installation involved a process of essentially reviving fragments of flesh from deceased animal bodies. Additionally, viewers were invited to actively participate in the performance by tending to the tissues and making decisions regarding which cultured tissues should be preserved and which should be terminated.

The project took on an extra layer of complexity as it was initially carried out in Barcelona with a tradition of bullfighting and an increasing local critique of this practice, alongside a rising number of fast food restaurants specializing in serving beef burgers. TC&A argued that the deaths of animals in a bullfight (for “aesthetic” purposes) and those slaughtered for meat ultimately have the same outcome: the fate of the animal is predetermined.

In the Barcelona fragments of tissue from a fighting bull were revived by seeding them onto a miniature replica of a souvenir-shop figurine of a bull. Subsequently, the tissue culture grown from the bull was compared with tissue grown from meat sourced from a slaughterhouse. During the project’s closing performance, the audience was tasked with interacting with these semi-living objects and, more significantly, making a decision about whether to return either the “corrida bull” or the “beef cow” to its culturally accepted status as lifeless meat.

Furthermore, DIY DVK demonstrates a shift in the concept of life. Despite a bull being killed in a bullfight, its cells may still be alive, capable of proliferation, nourishment, and sustenance. In this way, life, ascribed to the individual, becomes uncontainable even after the individual’s death.



Victimless Leather - TC&A
2004 Oron Catts & Ionat Zurr

In "Victimless Leather," the artists cultivate living tissue into leather-like material without harming animals in the process. The most significant aspect revolves around the concept of the semi-living. The tissue thrives within the realm of technology. Although it maintains biological life, its growth occurs exclusively within the sterile environment crafted by the artists.

The vital functions, growth, and development of the tissues used for the art pieces are intertwined with technology. The tissue cultures found in the examined art pieces, similar to any biological matter cultivated in a laboratory setting, rely on technological support such as sterile environments, nutrients, antibiotics, and constant sustenance. Simultaneously, they challenge the binary distinction we commonly employ to organize and interpret the world in terms of life and non-life. The sculptures vividly illustrate that the processes of living and dying unfold within the same material space and are inseparable from one another.

Life and Death

The death of individual cells and tissue fragments overlaps with the growth of contaminants: life functions and the very materiality of the tissues become resources for the infecting organisms. These tissues, in fact, serve as food, habitation, and a support system for the contaminating microorganisms like fungi, bacteria, and viruses. In this context, the conventional distinctions between life and death are irrelevant. Instead, we witness a continuous flux where living and dying are dynamic processes, material energies that unfold, intertwine, and manifest within what we typically perceive as the realms of life and death. The biological material within the tissue serves as both the habitat and nourishment for the infecting organisms. The metamorphoses of the tissue overlap with the growth and metabolism of the contaminants, while blurring the contours of each of these processes.

Similarly, the human body can be viewed as a dynamic arena where cells, tissues, and microorganisms (collectively referred to as nonhuman elements) undergo processes of proliferation, growth, degeneration, and death. These processes occur concurrently and are interconnected.

My project “troost - Lebende Erinnerung” examines the close relationship between life and death and tackles the ritualistic approaches of the own death via providing a new approach to burial rituals. The project is an urn made out of mycelium (Rootsystem of funghi) which is capable to transform itself and the ashes within it into life in the form of mushrooms, thus returning the material remnants of the deceased person back into the cycle of life.



troost - Lebende Erinnerung
2020 Dominik Einfalt



troost - Lebende Erinnerung
2020 Dominik Einfalt

Furthermore these mushrooms can be harvested and can be consumed as tea by family and friends in order to bring matter of the beloved back into the community, into their bodies.

The non-anthropocentric understanding of life emerges at the intersection of philosophy, science, and (bio-)art, revealing life as something boundless. Life manifests as a processual interplay of the living and the nonliving, as the material forces and the processes through which they manifest and evolve extend beyond individual organisms and defy conventional distinctions between life and non-life.

How can we acquire a deeper understanding of the traditional limits we've set for life, death, and the distinction between life and non-life. We should reconceive these notions as immanent flows, material forces, and the continuous process of differentiation. We should try to approach the concept of the non/living from entirely fresh perspectives!