

Rethinking Bio-Art's Universals Complex Amidst the Crisis of Globalism: A Study of the 2019 BAD Award Winners and *Polarities: Psychology and Politics of Being Ecological*

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Introduction

“Curating an exhibition that encompasses these bio artworks is a huge undertaking. It's a process of finding a position. It's an emotional position, but it's also a political position. We are in an urgent moment, so we are trying to find the connections between things. Making these connections is a beautiful process of puzzle solving.”

The quote is excerpted from curator Angelique Spaninks' opening speech for *Polarities: Psychology and Politics of Being Ecological*, which was curated by her, on November 29, 2019. If we take the three 2019 BAD Award-winning works presented in the exhibition, as well as other juxtaposed exhibits, as a cross-section representative of current Dutch bio art practices, Spaninks' message highlights, on the one hand, the political and aesthetic task of “creating new affinities” in curatorial practices and, on the other hand, reflects the interdisciplinary nature of bio art as a practice in the new affinities is highly difficult to create. When the hermaphrodite freshwater snail, the fungus replacing leather coating, and the photosynthetic bacteria intervened by algorithms need to be materialized and co-located in the same curatorial space, it is an issue that artists and curator need to deal with to make the highly heterogeneous human/nature/society complexes work together to form a stable symbolic order. . This reviews attempts to borrow the concept of "Friction" proposed by anthropologist Ana Tsing (2004) when discussing the phenomenon of "Global Connections" such as transnational capitalism and environmental movement. This paper attempts to borrow the concept of "Friction" proposed by anthropologist Ana Tsing (2004) when discussing the phenomena of "Global Connections" such as transnational capitalism and environmental movements, to analyze the characteristics of various art practices that can be observed in the exhibition space of *Polarities*. This is the creative friction of bio art, and the political problems that these frictions point to as a result of bio art's preference for "Universals" in making transdisciplinary connections.

Creative Friction

Tsing (2004) defines friction as the instability and incoherence that characterize the moment when natural/social phenomena of high heterogeneity encounter each other in the current process of globalization. With this concept, Tsing rejects the proposal of “the end of history” (Fukuyama 1992) that the late twentieth-century globalization theory optimistically imagines, in which all human beings are about to be unified under a single political and economic system, and emphasizes the high degree of chaos and uncertainty in the actual occurrence of various globalization phenomena.

In *Polarities*, heterogeneous phenomena meet and connect across disciplines, frequently occurring within and between works. Such trans-disciplinarity is temporal and spatial. “Resurrecting the Sublime” attempts to represent the fragrance of mallow flowers with DNA samples that were extinct in the Hawaiian Islands hundreds of years ago due to colonization. In a similar attempt to let people experience the historical existence of extinct species in the Hawaiian Islands, “Re-Animated” takes the viewer back to 1975 to listen to the last recorded courtship sound of the Kaua'i 'ō'ō using virtual reality technology. Leaving the North Pacific, “As Above, So Below” takes us to the forests of Chile in South America, where wave distorting satellite music, aerial cameras and micro-camera footage are used to document the destruction of forest lands and ecosystems by economic exploitation. Also concerned with forest ecology and human intervention, the forest in the work “(NON)Native” is located in Brabant, the Netherlands. Blackberry trees were once introduced into the ecosystem to improve soil quality, but today they are considered an exotic species that should be eradicated. Such a labeling process embodies the artificiality and instability of the concept of “native/exotic”. Away from the forest, “Legal Status of Ice” focuses on the cold Arctic and uses 3D models to represent the new shipping routes and the transnational political and economic struggles that will result from global warming and the melting of icebergs. Zooming in on the historical relationships between human individuals, “In Posse” attempts to reinterpret the ancient Greek celebration of female fertility at Thesmophoria by demonstrating the production of female sperm by stem cells. Yet, “Spirit Molecule” attempts to deal with a more intimate and personal part of history: the implantation of the genes of deceased intimates into psychostimulants such as tobacco. Through the sensory experiences evoked by these stimulants, we can once again physically interact with the deceased.

In these bio art works, individuals who were not expected to encounter each other in very different temporal, spatial, and species contexts are brought together by the making of the

works. Such encounters are difficult to describe precisely in terms of established cognitive or taxonomic frameworks, and therefore do not necessarily provide a universal criterion for relationships across species and time and space. How is an extinct species brought back into the present? How should the conflict between developmentalism and biodiversity be negotiated? Is it ethically appropriate to use biotechnology as a means of crossing the line between life, death and gender? As artistic practices, many of the works in *Polarities* certainly are not obliged to provide satisfying answers. However, from Ana Tsing's point of view, universals such as transnational capitalism and the ideology of scientific governance, the universals spread on a global scale, are still essentially the totality of globalisms practiced at the local level. And many of the works in *Polarities* depict the encounter between species of a particular context and these global forces. We are also aware of the unsettling and ambiguous character of globalization. And it is precisely by paying attention to the frictions generated by these unpredictable, transnational encounters that we avoid being completely subsumed into the globalized illusion of abstraction, de-historicization, and de-localization provided by the universals. As a result, these bio art works present a micro-history of a macrocosmic, global-scale phenomenon, and question the complex relations between nature and society within that micro-history. In the remark of curator Spaninks, the curatorial process of *Polarities* can be seen as "a choice between emotional and political position in a moment of urgency". As such, many of the exhibits in the exhibition are centered around current environmental concerns such as global warming and deforestation. The creative friction created by bio art is not only a stimulating personal aesthetic experience, but also a reflection on the highly visible global political and environmental issues of the day.

The Seduction of Universals

However, not all of the works of bio art in *Polarities* share the same degree of political and micro-historical sensitivity. More precisely, it is precisely the three-winning works of the 2019 BAD Award present the strongest expression of an unquestioning acceptance of universals and their abstract power. Working from an abstract and static conceptual hashtag, neglecting the landscape and temporal context of cross-species encounters and the potential of these unstable encounters to subvert the metaphysical narrative.

In "Sex Shells: Gender fluidity in the modern age," the artist uses freshwater snails that are hermaphrodite as a symbol of contemporary gender fluidity, and adorns the snail's shells

with gender-inspired ornaments to satirize the arbitrariness of the construction of the gender order in human society. Such an attempt certainly echoes the long-standing challenge to the established gender order posed by the queer identity and the feminist movement. However, by taking the biological phenomenon of hermaphroditism as natural evidence in support of a specific social value (gender fluidity), we can only see the juxtaposition of two artificial abstract concepts (the sociological "gender fluidity" and the biological "hermaphroditism") in this narrative operation, and the artist has not created a new cross-species connection. The existence of phenomena that can be labeled as "gender fluidity" in different socio-cultural contexts does not mean that these highly regional and culturally specific phenomena are really of a certain commensurability due to the convenience of a certain Western social scientific discourse and understanding. In other words, the radically different gender fluidity phenomena of transgender people derived from the LGBT movement, Two-Spirit people present in North American indigenous tribes, and Hijras, which are considered to be in-between genders in South Asian societies, when encountered with biologically hermaphroditic freshwater snails, would inevitably lead to creative friction are very different. In "Sex Shells," it projects images of dancers dancing behind a fish tank of freshwater snails, the "gender fluidity" envisioned by artist Jonathan Ho is clearly in the vein of contemporary queer theory and gender identity politics. The inability to pinpoint the specificity of this vein, and to treat gender fluidity directly as an abstract concept with universal coherence, is perhaps the main reason why this bio art work fails to become a meaningful "laboratory of ethics (Zylinska 2014)" and legitimizes its manipulation of natural life.

In a similar attempt to directly address the abstraction of the macroscopic, in "CMD: Experiments in Bio-Algorithmic-Politics," the artist has constructed several giant artificial ecosystems in bottles. In these systems, photosynthetic bacteria are rewarded by the production of oxygen in exchange for light, and the reward mechanism is regulated by algorithms. According to the artist, Michael Sedbon, "CMD" is a political experiment made up of cells and computers. Since the distribution of light (as a resource) depends on the amount of oxygen produced by photosynthetic bacteria, the entire "oxygen-for-light" artificial ecosystem is a simulation of a market transaction, and the artificially intelligent algorithms that determine the optimal distribution of resources are the economic rules behind the market. Undoubtedly, "CMD" is a spectacular work in terms of its technical complexity, and the most visually striking work in the entire **Polarities**. Connected with electronic devices, a giant bacterial vial emitting cold light, and intricate piping, it creates a

futuristic atmosphere reminiscent of a sci-fi movie. In terms of the construction of the narrative, "CMD" is also breathtakingly ambitious. Within the framework of "evolutionary design paradigm in the post-human world", the artist's interpretation of the meaning behind the work invokes Descartes' mind-object dualism, Haraway's Cyborg. Even at the end of the sentence "Our perception of reality, together with our ability to perceive it, is hard-coded," three books by three important thinkers - Baudrillard, Deleuze and James Scott - are added as references for the argument. To audiences outside of the humanities and sociology, these terms may seem to add a great deal of intellectual depth and persuasiveness to the work. However, the indiscriminate use of academic terms and celebrities as trendy jargon does not offer much in the way of substantive discussion of the contemporary issues behind these terms, other than to create a certain poetic or aesthetic mystique. The so-called "political intervention in a primitive biological society" that "CMD" demonstrates through the manipulation of photosynthetic bacteria is therefore, like "Sex Shells", a practice of analogizing the human social order through biological natural phenomena as a mediating unidirectionality. While it is true that the accumulation of complex scientific techniques and academic vocabulary can create an astonishing sense of spectacle, it also inadvertently creates a fetishism of abstract scientific and philosophical ideology as a universal object. Such an unreserved embrace of the universal is both apolitical and ahistorical, and thus deprives bio-art of its subversive potential.

In contrast to the previous two highly thesis-oriented award-winning works, "Fungkee | Fungal Supercoatings" shares a very different motivation. The artist, Emma van der Leest and Aneta Schaap-Oziemlak, have very pragmatic and functional goals, such as making fungal leather as waterproof and colour sustainable as animal leather, and at the same time using the unique scent of fungus. The ultimate goal is to create additional value and to make such biological innovations feasible on an industrial scale. "Fungkee" defines itself as a work of bio design rather than bio art. Therefore, it may be inappropriate to hold this work to the same critical standards as the other two award-winning works. However, the artist's repeated reference to fungal leather as a means to break the people's impression of fungi, is this imagination a universal homogeneity that transcends geographical and historical boundaries? Perhaps not, given the long history of human use of fungi for food processing and medical activities.

Conclusion

Beginning with the global economic crisis in 2008, the rise of far-right nationalism/populism and the successive defeats of the global environmental movement in the international political arena symbolize the dilemma faced by the current political and social atmosphere in the optimistic imagination of the late 19th century regarding the globalization theory that the world will eventually become flat. At this historical moment of increasing inequality and social conflict within-species, how is it possible for a politics of "cross-species" to exist that takes into account the relationship between humans and the natural world in a more macroscopic way? What is the stance of bio art, as a mode of art creation that actively engages with the complex political issues between species, and what is its position on the current tensions between "intra- and inter-species" issues? Rather than embracing universals such as the Anthropocene, which considers all human beings as a whole, a more precise access to the temporal, spatial and territorial context of each trans-species encounter may be another political approach to spare bio-art from the ecological viewpoints central to the Western industrial revolution and industrialization, and to maintain creative friction.

Reference

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