

Becoming Media: Yesterday's Fiction; Today's Reality

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Yesterday's Fiction, Today Reality

The 21st century has ushered in an era of making the fiction of yesterday into the reality of today: contemporary artists have become designers of the future. Research in bioinformatics, for example, has attracted the interest of a new generation of artists who, through their work, propose future scenarios in which a glimpse of post-humanism is staged as an artwork and the performative role of the artist takes on a demonstrative form of participatory evolution.

To achieve such scenarios, many artists have adapted design fiction as an approach to platforming new research and use it as a catalyst to debate and explore possible futures that are foreshadowed in their work. The works are often staged as provocations, achieved by conceiving a speculative scenario on a public platform so as to share a critical perspective with the viewer. In turn, the work inspires a debate with the goal of increasing the awareness around social, cultural, and ethical issues which are truly in need of being addressed.

Of course when design fiction is used to provide a critical perspective, it is, in its essence, a form of critical design, and by adapting such a practice, artists are able to use it to directly address the survival of the human species in unique ways. Through the invention of new and inspiring imaginaries about the future, artists can aid greatly in suspending

disbelief about the need for change in the present and so help shape positions that can draw the general public into participating. Through engagement with the artwork, the public is able to immerse themselves in a subject and help drive the issues at hand forward, and do so by simply reflecting on the possible consequences of current cultural values, morals, and practices.

Becoming Media

The increasing presence at exhibitions of artworks based on these principles is clear proof of the development of a new hybrid form in the arts, where artworks are staged in a theatrical manner, in which art objects are used as requisites, and where the use of living organisms and tissues, i.e., wet media, is prevalent. Taking a brief look at the use of such wet media in recent BioArt works, it becomes clear that a very new type of media has entered into the palette of the artist, and its inclusion brought new advances in participatory culture as well as introduced innovative ways to connect such media to existing technologies. As most of the artworks have a connection to, or are made savvy for, social media, a more diverse and larger audience emerges through a proactive use of social media platforms.

Much of what is being pointed out here can be addressed through a process that is best termed 'becoming media', which first began when media art became interactive and the viewer was placed in the role of content creator. The idea of becoming media took on new dimensions with the possibilities of deeper forms of immersion using new communication technologies and then truly culminated with the exploration of 'wet media' in the arts. The so-called *wet media* is now *new media*, and it is primarily in use amongst today's BioArtists who have explored it in many works as a growth media. Although the use of wet media in the arts is complex and hardly standardised, the results of its use by artists becomes

apparent when one realises what is being proposed through the concept of becoming media: it goes beyond the Beuysian concept of ‘everyone is an artist’ to one in which ‘everyone is the artwork’. If we consider the potential inherent in this (in light of the fact that wet media’s main use in artwork as well as in bio labs is for culturing microorganisms), then it becomes possible to imagine that if the microorganisms were made airborne and have some form of infection property, everyone would, at least conceptually, be transformed into an artwork through mere infection. Although this might seem far-fetched, it starts taking on more validity when we consider that engineering of new organisms is a common practice in bioengineering. In fact, in a more sci-fi-like scenario, one could imagine – as Critical Art Ensemble has done – that a trans-genetic virus could impact our DNA in such a way that a transformation from human to post-human is made possible.

However, in order to go more deeply into the concept of becoming media (to explain its application in more detail), it is best to look into what is being done at present in the area of BioArt . Here, an ever-increasing number of artists are making use of wet media to create artworks around fictional scenarios, which use imaginative solutions to address issues (such as future foods, food waste, global pandemics, and so on) whilst shedding light, at the same time, on the need to address important ethical issues (arising from a world in which genetic engineering is in increasing use).

Theory to Practice

Highly relevant to this discussion is the work of one of the first to use wet media in their practice, the Critical Art Ensemble, who approaches art as a tool for directly engaging the public in a performative way with areas of science that are generally unfamiliar to the wider public. To heighten the impact of their performances, members of the Critical Art Ensemble often appear dressed as professional scientists in order to mimic workers

at actual biotechnology corporations. Of course, this aids in getting the audience immersed in a fictive design world so that the artists can better address the subject at hand, and although the group's primary role is to 'edutain' the public, it does effectively show how science can be referenced in a performance and be used to create a situation in which knowledge is transferred outward to a public audience.

Several of their works have engaged areas of microbiology, reproductive technologies, genetics, and transgenics. In their work *GenTerra*, for example, the group raised issues surrounding ethics and safety in biotechnology science. Based around the game of Russian roulette, audience members were engaged with the choice of releasing microorganisms into the environment. This was done with the aid of a spinning machine resembling a large revolver, where only one of ten chambers was actually 'loaded' with bacteria. Not knowing whether the bacteria was a deadly trans-genetic virus or something harmless, the audience was forced to consider the possible consequences of releasing unknown bacteria into the environment.

In this particular scenario, it is the museum visitors who are offered the choice. However, if the chance is taken and the release button is pressed, the question comes to mind: What are the results going to be when the material is released into the open? Of course, being a fictitious scenario using only common bacteria already present in the environment, the only thing of importance to consider is the conscious act of deciding to opt for participating in the possibility of releasing something into the environment when one does not really know if the act will be a harmful one. However, if it was (although highly unlikely) a deadly virus, we could indulge ourselves with more art theory and term the wet media in use in the work as 'infectious media'. Going back to the original concept of 'everyone is an artwork', we are able to identify the performative actions in the work as the process through which the audience is transformed into the artwork itself. Regardless of whether the material was dangerous or harmful, the more important aspect of *GenTerra* is that the transformation

from human to artwork takes place because the audience might well believe that they have been ‘infected’ with the microorganism and have become the artwork.

Taking a step backward in time, it would only be fair to acknowledge that the first generation of BioArtists were of paramount importance in paving the way for the creation of art that engages scientific research methods and for establishing channels of communication with the scientific community that provided the proper setting for the creation of such art. The works of the artists we feature here could hardly have come about without their cooperation with scientific research centres. It is the more recent generations of BioArtists who have truly benefited from the practices established by this first generation and who have made use of that positioning to move the field forward by creating works in which science still plays an important role, but in which the focus is placed on adapting design fictions that guide the viewer to perceive the artwork as being embedded in a social-cultural dialogue whose content reflect the problems of today and possible solutions of tomorrow.

The ‘After Information Series’ by Nestor Pestana, for example, is an ongoing research project that incorporates a series of fictional narratives that the artist has translated into diverse media including illustrations, films, and performative experiments. Regardless of the form in which they emerge, all of the works are imaginaries of a post-informational era – one where biotechnologies are more common and widely accepted. For example, in one of the works in the After Information Series, the fictional community *Infumis* manipulates their skin microbiome to host bioengineered bacteria that are capable of synthesising carbon pollutants into nutrients – nutrients which are then absorbed directly into the bloodstream to nourish the body. The artist places the *Infumis* community in a real-world context and has them living beneath large traffic intersections. As a fictitious scenario (a cautionary narrative) it re-depicts non-habitable space as habitable, pushing the boundaries of the possible through the proposition that biotechnological

interventions can solve real-world problems in the area of food futures and environmental pollution.

A scenario in which virology is used in evolutionary roles can be experienced in the BioArt work by Paul Gong entitled the *Human Hyena*. Through a fictional scenario, the artist proposes the use of synthetic biology to create new bacteria capable of modifying the human digestive system towards that of the hyena in order to extend the taste palette of the human to that of the omnivores. In this manner, humans would be able to consume carrion and other forms of rotting foods so that, on the one hand, food waste can be eliminated and, on the other, food resources expanded. The proposal to accomplish this is expressed artificially in an elaborately designed fiction, one in which the artist uses a genetically modified virus to introduce genetic material into cells of the body to mutate gene production that would result in 'enhancing' the host.

This work is another example of a classic use of design fiction, in which a scenario is created so that the audience is able to decipher the meaning of the work through the actions of the performers. In *Human Hyena*, the viewer who is fresh to the performance sees three performers sitting at a table covered with diverse dishes of rotten food as contents of a meal for the performers. Each of the performers holds, and licks, an object in their hands. As the objects are neither implements for eating nor something that can be eaten, the audience is forced to ponder their use. However, it is possible to decipher their meaning through the context, i.e., title of the work, the scenario, and the actions of the performers. In the end, it becomes clear that these items are designed specifically to aid proper ingestion of the synthetic bacteria, which allow the dinner guests to consume what is being offered, i.e., food waste. All in all, the scenario instills a sense of curiosity in the visitor who is witness to a desire in the form of a voracious appetite for the non-palatable. The ironic gestures of appetite on the faces of the performers inevitably lead us to the realisation that although the scenario

is fictitious, the possibility for solutions beyond what is easily imaginable are acknowledged by the members of the audience.

Conclusion

The use of the term 'media' in the arts has changed historically, and this is due to the influence of artists who work both in the arts and the sciences or whose work stems from scientific research. In BioArt specifically, the term wet media is used and it conventionally refers to bioengineered tissues or organisms as the medium of an artwork. Through the artworks discussed above, the strategy for using wet media can be understood as an interest in exploring the real and fictive possibilities of the human body such that it is able to serve as a medium itself, around which an open discussion on a variety of topics around genetics is made possible.

Wet media is certainly new to the arts, and its use under the concept of 'becoming media' is best interpreted as a kind of embodied engagement in which the human body becomes a medium for the life-forms used in the artwork. This pushes the concept of becoming-media into a phenomena in which those engaging with such an artwork are made capable of believing their own body to have been used as media in the work and that their role as mere spectators has ceased; i.e., that they are transformed into integral part of the work and integrated into the milieu of the exhibition.

Novalis understood that all enjoyment and all taking-in is a form of assimilation, meaning that processes such as eating are nothing other than assimilation of an object into oneself. So, if our understanding of the consumption of art can be compared to a kind of eating with the senses than the notion of comprehending an artwork becomes an act of assimilation, or a kind of sublimated devouring of the external, which undergoes a transformation into something that 'becomes' part of us.