

# Bio-Fiction

> report



In 2009 as they were working on a documentary film on Synthetic Biology (SynBio), Camillo Meinhart and Markus Schmidt began to wonder what kind of cultural vectors should be considered when we talk about risk assessment in synthetic biology. This resulted in the emergence of the BIO-FICTION Science Art Film Festival in 2014 the first festival of its kind on SynBio. In parallel to the BIO-FICTION festival, a six-week long exhibition was shown at the Museum of Natural History (NHM) in Vienna. Although the exhibition was titled “Synthetic”, the intention of the curators was clearly not to provoke a moral impact, but rather to spark an informed discussion on the topics that SynBio raises in society. Fostering a similar type of practical ethics, BIO-FICTION was also meant to explore novel forms of interaction with Synthetic Biology in society. The idea of having a festival like BIO-FICTION was to allow for different perspectives to emerge in order to better understand the social images and imaginaries of synthetic biology. The festival aimed to provoke reflection on the increasing symbiotic relationship between biology and artificial objects, a relation that has the potential to reshape the fundamental anatomy and physiology of the species living on this planet. The convergent technologies that make up Synthetic Biology tend to weaken the standard divide that characterises the epistemological and ontological definition of both living things and machines. Such technologies now represent a critical point for

rethinking what kind of metaphors and discourses are bound to the disciplines that are interested in both biology and in technological development, thus paving the way for new approaches that aim to grasp the diverse relations between biology, machines, and the natural environment. Ana Delgado, PhD, a researcher of the University of Bergen, which cooperates in the SYNENERGENE framework, reminds us that art and other cultural forms have always been useful to explore how ethical concerns are framed within the imaginary of people. Cultural artefacts and their processes tell us a lot about how people imagine and desire the near future(s).

The second edition of BIO-FICTION was held in Vienna in October 2014. Throughout the three days of the festival, the sessions included cultural exhibitions, intense debate panels, and of course, film screenings. 200,000 years after the speciation of *Homo sapiens*, this festival presents us with a series of fictional species of *Homo*, seeming to indicate that the increased cultural 'biodiversity' developed around the many topics of SynBio has now been incarnated into novel types of human beings. Particular attention was given to the emerging scene of diy-bio by the organisers Meinhart and Schmidt. Since 2011, there has been a huge upsurge of grassroots collectives that call themselves 'hacktivists'. Arguably, these diy-bio practices suffer from a sort of cultural amnesia, as the festival curator and conference speaker Jens Hauser pointed out. Even if they apparently democratise tools and apply principles of hacking and tinkering as opposed to pure purpose-oriented engineering, they also seem to lack the political mission that characterised much of the hacking culture in the past. This cultural amnesia raises questions about what kinds of metaphoricity are bound to such practices. Over the last three years, the discourse around cultural processes was predominant; therefore, in addition to the film festival, the organisers did not curate an exhibition of mere objects that ran the risk of remaining self-subsistent and self-referential. Instead, they allocated the available funds to cultural processes that use art to generate

prototypes. For instance, The Center for PostNatural History (CPNH) showed some artefacts in Vienna. The CPNH is dedicated to the collection, documentation and exhibition of living organisms that have been intentionally and heritably altered by human beings through processes such as domestication, selective breeding and genetic engineering. Another example was given at the Pathologic-Anatomical Museum Narrenturm, where participants attended an art performance, "Hare's Blood+". By means of transgenic techniques, bio-artists Klaus Spiess and Lucie Strecker enhanced Joseph Beuys' multiple "Hare's Blood," producing a cell strain with its own commercial significance: "Hare's Blood+". The enhanced blood cells now recognised their own auction values, as well as the trading values for livestock on the stock exchange. The cells are programmed to inhibit their growth if the relation between auction values and livestock trades on the stock exchange conflicts with Joseph Beuys' concept of free-trade. The artists engage concepts of a 'living money' when the artwork is consigned to its "collectors" in a performative auction. This performative artwork rejects definite property rights or market prices for the "biobanked" animal in art, proposing instead a living substance that 'learns' to quantify its own value. In the darkness of a small room, at the NHM, we encounter a "Lucid Phantom Messenger" by artist Herwig Weiser. Bringing together fluorescent quantum dots, and mixing and changing substances in a live life-like process, the work juxtaposes a teleological engineering approach with the unpredictable effects of evolution. The "Lucid Phantom Messenger" reminds us, in a glowing play of fluorescent objects, that the deployment of a highly rational system is facilitated by the emergence of unpredictable and sometimes irrational patterns.

Focusing on cultural bridges that map processes of production over final bio-products facilitates audience understanding of the many social and ethical aspects underpinning Synthetic Biology. During his panel, Jens Hauser wore a t-shirt that stated in capital letters "We Have Always

Been BioHackers". This epic statement was first pronounced in 2010 by Zack Denfield and Cat Kramer from The Centre for Genomic Gastronomy. In response to a call for a multi-year grant proposal, Denfield and Kramer came up with three big ideas to explore over the next ten years, one of which was "We Have Always Been BioHackers". The phrase became a way to link the work of free culture activists and food activists over the centuries. How should we acknowledge the huge amount of genetic manipulation performed by agriculturalists from the dawn of agriculture to today? How is their labour accounted for and thus rewarded? How is it positioned in contrast to the proprietary biotech that has sprung up in the last 25 years? In this light, a parallel action was about connecting the possibilities of contemporary biotech with the work being done by cheese makers, brewers and so on. The panel discussions at the Bio-Fiction Festival 2014 revealed a further cultural amnesia embodied in the huge resistance to art as a topic. As Hauser pointed out: "[...]this is also interesting because it appears that the word art seems to be considered old-fashioned and bourgeois, and therefore is not be used anymore. While when hacktivism stands in fact on the same side of critical art, it's surely a new claim to define something as newer or more avanguardistic (like biohacking) than something that we have left behind (as bioart)." Hauser took up the discussion of the cultural amnesia the scene is suffering from, focusing on who claims the origin of what. Over twenty years ago, Bruno Latour, in his book *We Have Never Been Modern*, described how modernity invented the difference between culture and nature, by extracting humans from nature. In the "Parliament of Things," Latour presents us with new tools, but also with ecological responsibilities. Similarly, Hauser points to the risks of a cultural amnesia in SynBio, and in the diy-bio scene at large. "We Have Always Been Biohackers," but the fact is that we are only realising it now. Despite the broad multidisciplinary discussions that happened during the BIO-FICTION festival, the focus was still largely anthropocentric. Hackers have in many ways always been subversive and anti-

institutional. But if we consider the aesthetics of the Bio-Hacking Safari project that photo-documented the festival, a staggering glorification of the individuals prevails. People in diy-bio appear reluctant to define their actual motivations, and hide behind a communal approach that merges entrepreneurial interests with the need to appear to challenge institutions and places – two very disparate approaches. However, with the rise of new types of economies that are more focused on value creation and less on capital concentration, it is also possible that the entrepreneurial drive and the will for social innovation could co-exist. At the same time, there's always the risk that many will simply exploit an ethical facade to cleanse their brand image and nothing more, as has already happened with the phenomena of 'greenwashing' in the green economy. While the Bio-Commons project as a case study addresses the crisis of antibiotics discovery by leveraging distributed research and alternative IP regimes, environmental concerns remain. Generally-speaking, the focus is still about the well-being of humans. However, this is natural, as antibiotics crisis have the greatest ecological impact on humans. In fact, Rüdiger Trojok, author of the Bio-Commons whitepaper, argues that the anthropocentric approach of the paper has to be considered in the light of philosopher Slavoj Žižek's debate on a renewed ecology: as a way to detach the discourse from ineffective moralisation, which has perpetuated the actual ecological problems by obstructing pragmatic solutions in order to save ideological purity. Indeed, Bio-Commons seems to offer an option for pragmatic problem solving, trying to step out of the moral dichotomy that characterises the Manichaeic debate of think-tanks in biotechnology assessment. The Bio-Commons meeting was interspersed with short talks by artists who were given the opportunity to explain their body of work in the context of diy-biology, and provide their own perspectives. This included the talk 'Biohack the Economy' by Raph Kim, a biohacker-designer who aimed to explore possible scenarios for how microbes could be hacked to

manipulate financial markets. In a project titled Microbial Money, he created a series of staged photographs that narrated the scenarios of both corrupt bankers and biohackers using specialised microbes for illegal trading. These are scenarios that not only corroborate the probable anthropocentric drive behind open source technology, but also highlight the dangers of criminal applications – questions of ethics and social implications that enriched the discussion of the pros and cons of DIY biology. As opposed to a large part of the diy-bio scene, in many art projects, as well as the awarded films of the festival, philosophical approaches to challenge anthropocentrism are much more developed. A novel and somehow unexpected hybridity emerges in the films presented at BIO-FICTION. What is interesting when looking at the winners of the so-called 'categories' is that categories themselves do not seem to have sense anymore; nowadays they're easily intertwined due to our expanded technical possibilities. Even if social structures have made very clear what a fiction film is, what an animation film is, or a documentary, such categories are no longer clearly identifiable. We can see this in two awarded films: the fiction prize was awarded to a partly animated film – Hybris by Arjan Brentjesa, while the documentary prize was won by a mockumentary – New Mumbai by Tobias Revell. Hybris explores the post-human dimension and meaning of life in the light of immortality. New Mumbai depicts a metropolis invaded by an energy-producing mushroom, illustrating the impossibility of total social control over nature. Vermin by Adi Gelbart won the special prize, showing a psychedelic alien invasion of giant vegetables on planet Earth, where the unaware humans become mere caretakers of the alien's 'brothers and sisters'. The Giant Onion represents the ultimate emotionless God to worship, as opposed to the emotive capitalistic nature of human activities that destroyed the planet. Copy & Clone by Louis Rigaud was awarded the animation prize, with a nice representation of the algorithmic mechanisation of meat production. Profit-driven optimisation no longer accounts for the

cycles and complexities of the ecosphere, ultimately triggering non-linear effects that bounce back onto humans.

If this festival develops further, in the next editions we might expect bio-films, art or cultural forms that are expressed even in biological media in the near future, as Hauser suggest. This would be fascinating to see, especially if we consider that the media in which cultural forms are expressed is not only employed to achieve aesthetic effects, but is itself a constitutional part of the aesthetic idiom.

Ultimately, BIO-FICTION presents a hybrid mixture of human beings who suffer from a cultural amnesia and who try to cope with the dynamics their own activities have generated. In a certain way, a film festival seems to be obsolete, as everybody can film today. And yet, the BIO-FICTION festival has been a success; the discussions on the social implication of SynBio would not attract the attention of such a broad audience otherwise. In fact, through art and other forms of cultural organisation and of contestation, BIO-FICTION talks to an extremely large and diverse audience. This festival also shows a will to co-exist in the same cultural ecosystem. Thus, even if the positions are multipolar (and it's clear that very often we're not speaking the same language despite using the same words), these moments allow for "fruitful misunderstandings," as Hauser once again reminds us, which allow a rich and direct confrontation between participants. With such an 'ecology' of opinions, this festival helped to raise public discussion on issues of convergent technologies and their unpredictable consequences at massive scales. What BIO-FICTION reminds us by showing the cultural amnesia that some of its diverse participants suffer from, is the unquestionable importance to look back at our cultural heritage.

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