

Victoria Vesna

Genetic technologies and animals

Published online: 22 September 2005
© Springer-Verlag London Limited 2005

As North American editor of *AI & Society* I was charged by the executive editor, Karamjit Gill, to bring forth more articles on media arts, specifically to technological innovations and societal issues in culture at large. I felt that this was a unique opportunity to solicit authors to address issues that are frequently not delved deep enough into, precisely because of the arts context. One such subject is biotechnology and art which has had a few years of real boom with many artists either toying with the surface of these issues or plunging deep into controversy. Eduardo Kac is one such artist who took a huge leap into the center of uncharted territory and created much emotional and intellectual response. Since he is my close colleague as we both worked on our PhDs in the CAiiA program headed by Roy Ascott,¹ I was very close to his seeing a public drama unfold around a piece he created during this time—GFP Bunny.² Carol Gigliotti, who I solicited to develop this special issue, is also a friend and colleague of Kac, supporting his previous work and curating an earlier work into the SIGGRAPH art show.³ So naturally though Gigliotti herself had already written the essay, “Leonardo’s Choice,” she was somewhat uncomfortable with having his work be the basis of a more general critique of the ethics of using animals in artwork. But, she also felt that their friendship is not based on agreement on everything and that it could withstand this difference of view.

When I reviewed the essays by the authors Steven Best, Lynda Birke, Susan McHugh and Steven Baker, I was struck with the realization that all discuss his work, and even if they are critical, that this is a testament to his important role

¹ CAiiA/STAR (now called The Planetary Collegium) is based at the University of Plymouth, England is concerned with advanced inquiry in the transdisciplinary space between the arts, technology, and the sciences, with consciousness research an integral component of its work. CAiiA-STAR, an integrated research platform which combined, CAiiA, the Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts established by Professor Ascott in 1994, at University of Wales College Newport, and STAR, the Science Technology and Art Research centre, which he established in 1997 at the University of Plymouth. See <<http://www.planetary-collegium.net/about/>>

² According to Kac, “GFP Bunny” comprises the creation of a green fluorescent rabbit, the public dialogue generated by the project, and the social integration of the rabbit. GFP stands for green fluorescent protein. “GFP Bunny” was realized in 2000 and first presented publicly in Avignon, France. See <<http://www.ekac.org/gfpbunny.html>>

³ Kac, Eduardo. Teleporting and Unknown State. ACM SIGGRAPH Art Show: Museum of Contemporary Art, New Orleans. See <<http://www.siggraph.org/artdesign/gallery/S96/brid27.html>>

as a media artist. Although the arguments are well thought through, and certainly thought provoking, if not sobering, it is clear that not too many scientists have generated such a lively debate. This is a clear example of the importance of artists who are working with scientific and technological innovations, even if we make mistakes along the way. After all, “mistakes” are really the way we learn and those who are willing to take risks put themselves in a vulnerable position, as Kac did. There is no doubt that he has learned a lot from this episode in his career, but so have many other media artists interested in exploring this explosive territory who were observing from the side. In that sense, I would like to alert the reader not to think of Eduardo Kac, or the work of Zurr and Catts also mentioned frequently, in a negative light but instead appreciate their brave stance in taking the center stage catalyzing serious thought as the authors in this issue do.

Just as Kac, Zurr and Catts take risks in using animals and living cells in their work, so too Gigliotti takes a risk for taking an activist stance in theoretical circles. In that sense this issue also shows the importance of dialogue between media artists, scientists, critical theorists and historians. Indeed, if we are to create work that will have serious impact on our culture at large, it is our responsibility to engage people from as many disciplines, with as many differing and even contradictory point of views, as we possibly can. Our world is too complex, too problematic and too overwhelming to be approached from one angle. Gigliotti brings to the table the intricate links of aesthetics and ethics in technologically driven artwork that is not to be taken lightly when working with living beings. And so it is my pleasure to bring in the debate of use of genetic technologies and animals, catalyzed by scientists engaged in this work and artists commenting on this stage of our collective approach to the world we live in.

V. Vesna
North American Editor