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LEONARDO ABSTRACT SERVICES (LABS) 2008-2009

GROWING SEMI-LIVING ART

By Ionat Zurr and Oron Catts

In 1996 Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr coined the term Semi-Livings to describe the living tissue constructs that are grown/constructed out of tissues taken from complex organisms and maintained alive with the aid of technological intervention. The Semi-Livings refers mainly to living tissue constructs that have no biomedical purpose. In the case of Catts and Zurr these evocative entities are created for the sole purpose of art. The Semi-Livings are unique examples of a growing class of objects/subjects that are increasingly populating our made environment. This thesis is the story of these tissue constructs as well as the techno-scientific project which sustains them alive and further articulates their meanings and purposes. This investigation is conducted in times of rapid developments in the life sciences and their applied technologies, when the humanist view of human separation and domination over nature is under great challenge. The thesis explores issues concerning the nature of living fragments of bodies and how they force us – humans – to reassess our understandings of life. It narrates the history of partial life, beginning a century ago, mainly in the bio-medical field and the fiction stories it created, to the times when actual semi-livings exist, not only in laboratories and tissue banks, but also in factories, museums, zoos and art galleries. The new and re-emerging ethical questions raised by such a phenomenon are discussed. The role of the artist working with living (and semi-living) materials in the context of post-capitalism and genohype is interrogated. The aim is to reveal and establish a new field within the arts – Tissue Art – pioneered by the artists of the Tissue Culture & Art project (Catts and Zurr) and the ensuing development of SymbioticA, an Artistic Research Laboratory, at the School of Anatomy and Human Biology of the University of Western Australia. We are living in times when new understandings of life through advances in scientific knowledge and new abilities to manipulate life through applied technologies are increasingly incompatible with traditional cultural and ontological perceptions of life. This gap between current (and potential) bio-technological practices and cultural beliefs is the niche explored by the Tissue Culture & Art project (TC&A). The TC&A's Semi-Livings are conceptual prototypes of a new kind of 'life' that is neither living nor non-living, that can be genderless, multiracial and species-less (or multi-species). The search for articulating these entities and re-taxonomising them within a post-anthropocentric frame is the aim of my writings. The thesis is illustrated with artworks created by the TC&A and other artists working hands-on with life.

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