

Bodily Matters: Human Biomatter in Art

Louise Mackenzie

Wishful Thinking or Velleity, With(out) Volition

The physical manifestation of human will in a biotechnological era. A discussion on the construction of a live bio-artwork.

I am working with the Institute of Genetic Medicine at Newcastle University to explore the unknown implications of research into living matter as material, using my (extended) body as site of practice. We will engineer a synthetic string of DNA in the form of a thought, from my mind, to be placed within my own (biopsied) skin cells. The thought is translated into DNA, the language of the body and will be transcribed within my cells through a viral host. This thought is volition, a will to act: held, external to my mind, yet internal to my body (cells) as synthetic other. It is at once a part of me and alien to me. I will then nurture this externalization of my body to determine whether my cells accept, reject or alter this synthetic question. Just as synthetic biology is the imposition of human will onto living systems, I choose to impose my will, literally, on the living system of my body.

Synthetic biology: the genetic manipulation of microbial organisms and mammalian cells for the purposes of medical and commercial research is a fast growing area of funded research. It is an inter-disciplinary field engaging the sciences, engineering, art and design, with aspirations to create living machines that will better humanity, using technology to automate biological processes and offering hope of ending world poverty and hunger. This work questions whether such claims are by their very nature a velleity: a wish that we have no strong desire to follow through on. Buffered by investment into wishful thinking, the field of synthetic biology grows primarily on commercial terms, without any physical body fully accepting responsibility for the unknowable long-term outcomes. It is the will of the artist that attempts to circumvent this velleity by using the body as site for the imposition of will.

Biography

Louise Mackenzie is a UK based artist creating installation, sculpture, performance, sound and film works. With a focus on living material, she is interested in the relationships between medium, sound, image and text, attempting to find ways in which these can be connected to produce unexpected results.

Recent projects have included an audio-visual installation relating the microbiological to the cosmological for Lumiere Durham 2015, a bio art installation with Newcastle University School of Marine Science and Technology, revealing the sublime in cyanobacteria and a micro-residency with Lancaster University exploring social communication in bacteria. Louise received the New Graduate Award at Synthesis, Manchester Science Festival, 2013 and was shortlisted for the Bio Art & Design Awards, 2015 in The Netherlands. She is currently recipient of post-graduate research funding from BxNU Institute of Contemporary Art, a Northumbria University and BALTIC partnership, to explore the agency of the organism within fine art practice.