



January 2004

TECH

GENETIC DISORDER

STEVEN SHAVIRO ON BIOAESTHETICS

JEFFREY THOMAS'S SCIENCE-FICTION short story "The Reflections of Ghosts" (1995) tells of an artist named Drew, whose medium is cloning. Drew grows clones of himself in womblike vats, manipulates their development in gruesome ways—deforming their bodies and crippling their minds—and turns them into living works of art. He releases some to wander the city until they die and sells others to rich art patrons, who torture and kill the clones for the amusement of their dinner-party guests. Drew rationalizes this by telling himself that his clones have such feeble minds that they aren't really human and cannot suffer very much. Everything changes, however, when he grows a female clone of himself, becomes enamored of his own creation, and starts having sex with her. . . .

Of course, Thomas's chilling fable goes well beyond what biotechnology can actually do today, but the gap between fantasy and fact is rapidly closing. It seems likely that within my daughter's lifetime, if not my own, we will be able to clone ourselves, create hybrid organisms through gene splicing, incorporate silicon chips in our brains, interface machinery directly with our nervous systems, and reset our neurotransmitter and hormone levels at will.

Technological innovation, especially in biology, is inherently risky and unpredictable, because it is less an affair of manipulating the external world than one of experimenting on—and thereby altering—ourselves. How can we come to terms with these new technologies, when their very effect is to change who "we" are? How do we judge them, when they undermine, or render irrelevant, the norms and criteria that ground our judgments? This is the fatal flaw that vitiates recent attempts to construct a bioethics or a biopolitics. We are already having trouble dealing with the limited forms of cloning and genetic engineering that we are capable of today. What will we do when advances in these practices force us to redefine, more and more radically, what we mean by such basic concepts as self, life, humanity, and nature?

I'd like to suggest that we are faced here with a problem of aesthetics rather than one of ethics. I use these terms in the strictest Kantian sense. Ethics, for Kant, is universal. An ethical judgment is valid at all times and for all situations. Aesthetics, by contrast, is singular and ungrounded. An aesthetic judgment, Kant says, is not just a personal preference; in making it, I must go beyond my own subjectivity. But neither is such a judgment objective. I am forced to make a decision without having any preexisting rules to guide me, and I must try to convince other people that I am right without having any common founda-

tion to appeal to. An aesthetic judgment responds to a particular, contingent situation; it cannot be repeated, generalized, or codified.

In order to confront the new biotechnology, then, we need a *bioaesthetics* more than a bioethics. We need an aesthetic practice that is as radical and innovative as the biological sciences themselves have been. Biological art, however, is still in its infancy; just look at the time line. Eduardo Kac first

TO CONFRONT THE NEW BIOTECHNOLOGY, WE NEED A BIOAESTHETICS MORE THAN A BIOETHICS: AN AESTHETIC PRACTICE AS RADICAL AS THE BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES THEMSELVES HAVE BEEN.

proposed the idea of transgenic art in 1998, and his own earliest example of it, Alba the genetically altered, glow-in-the-dark bunny, was born in 2000. The first major retrospective of the genre, "Gene(sis): Contemporary Art Explores Human Genomics," including work by Kac and others, was put together only in 2002. (It will travel to Minneapolis and Evansville, Indiana, this year). Today, in 2004, artists and activists—most notably Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), whose work is featured in "Gene(sis)"—have started

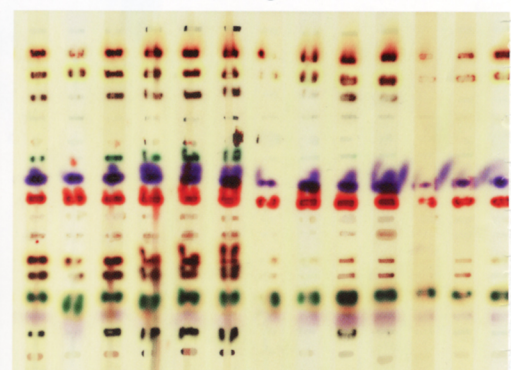
to talk about putting genetic engineering in the hands of the general public, but moving from talk to action remains an open question. We are still far from the vision of Paul DiFilippo, in whose science-fiction book *Ribofunk* (1996) "home amino-linkers and chromo-cookers" flourish the way meth labs do today.

"Gene(sis)" is symptomatic of the current self-limiting nature of genetic artistic practice. Too many of the works in this exhibition are merely illustrative rather than truly innovative. Their take on genetics is overly simplistic. For instance, Jaq Chartier's paintings transform gel-electrophoresis readouts (used to analyze strands of DNA) into ravishing visual abstractions. Such works fail to consider how DNA as image is embedded in and produced out of a wide range of technological, medical, forensic, and legal practices. They attribute almost magical powers to DNA, even as they ostensibly question the instrumentalism and gene-centrism of mainstream biotechnology.

At the opposite extreme from most of the pieces and artists in "Gene(sis)," Critical Art Ensemble has done more than anyone to analyze the rhetoric of genetics and to unravel the political economy of the biotech industry. CAE's work is exemplary for the way it mixes thoroughgoing critique with sarcastic

and highly theatrical agitprop. Their project *Cult of the New Eve*, 2000, for instance, literalizes the salvational rhetoric often found in propaganda for the biotech industry by enacting the rituals of a cult dedicated to sacraments of transgenic beer and wafers. Meanwhile, CAE's publications, like the recent *Molecular Invasion* (2002), analyze both the claims and the activities of the biotech industry, and offer counterproposals for "fuzzy biological sabotage."

But I can't help feeling that CAE is just not science-fictional enough. In its call for public participation in the decisions about technology that are currently made by corporations and agencies without any public accountability, CAE remains in the sphere of a universalizing biopolitics, one that seeks to minimize risk. The group does not take up the unique challenges of what I have been calling bioaesthetics. While its critique of domination is important, CAE can be faulted for refusing to



engage the sheer weirdness, excessiveness, and otherness of biotechnology.

Bioaesthetics needs to be excessive as well as critical. It must be wasteful, extravagant, and non-utilitarian. It must be ready, at any moment, to turn back upon itself, experiment upon itself, and put itself at risk, as the ethically dubious artist does in Jeffrey Thomas's short story. It must try to imagine the unimaginable, to ask questions that are not supposed to be asked, and to transgress the limits of positivist understanding. Bioaesthetics will be convulsive or not at all. □

Steven Shaviro is professor of cinema studies at the University of Washington, Seattle.

Left: Critical Art Ensemble, *Cult of the New Eve*, 2000. Performance still. Right: Jaq Chartier, *Dye Sequence*, 2000, acrylic, ink, chemical stains, and spray paint on panel, 24 x 36".