

reason mentioned above. Ascott's fundamental inspiration is artistic. It is not his job to give a cure for cancer or for world debt. His task is vision, on a scale that mere futurology cannot undertake. His work is certainly not selfish, quite the contrary. He has the most generous attitude towards his fellow humans it is possible to imagine. And though a critic can carp at this as willful and dangerous naïveté, well, that is the job of a critic. The work of an artist, in the early 21st century, is no longer negative. Adorno, for my money the most important philosopher of the 20th century, can no longer convince us that Beckett and Berg are the last word, not when nihilism has become coffee-table theory and No Future has moved from punk situationism to become a staple of the Top 40. As essayist, Ascott does not pretend to coherence: he wants to inspire. As I look over his career, I see that he has indeed achieved that, and then I realize that even this critique has its own tribute to pay. If I want to anchor Ascott, he now wants to anchor himself, "flying with our feet on the ground," as he says in the "Moist Media Manifesto" that concludes the collection. The body after all is a system, and the globe a braided web of systems interacting with systems. Conceptualizing art as the production of systems that will nudge and adjust all abutting systems, and be nudged and adjusted in turn, is indeed a visionary statement of the potential for humanity to proceed, but now in partnership with the green world and the technological. The challenge Ascott lays down is not so much to disprove him as to find better ways to include more actors in the network, to democratize more radically, and to ground more substantially. The reader will find much to disagree with in this book, and much to learn in the disagreeing.

PLANTS, PATENTS AND THE HISTORIAN: (RE)MEMBERING IN THE AGE OF GENETIC ENGINEERING

by Paolo Palladino. Rutgers Univ. Press, New Brunswick, NJ, U.S.A., 2002. 250 pp., illus. ISBN: 0-8135-3238-8.

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It is not a small feat to combine critical reflections on historiography, the his-

tory of plant genetic engineering and medical genetic engineering in one narrative. But that is exactly what Paolo Palladino, a senior lecturer in history at Lancaster University, has done. The result is a complex and fascinating book that has to be read at several equally important levels at a time.

For the reader who is mainly interested in the history of plant breeding and genetic engineering, there is the story of the institutionalization of plant research in the United Kingdom. The struggle between "applied" science in agricultural practice and "pure" scientific research in the laboratory has dominated the development of genetics, finally resulting in the privatization of the main institute for genetic research under the government of Margaret Thatcher. The sale of the Plant Breeding Institute for £66 million to Unilever and the resale for the staggering amount of £320 million to Monsanto 10 years later can be understood in the light of that struggle. Ironically, nationalization of genetic research in the late 19th and early 20th centuries served the same fundamental goals of control as did privatization in the late 20th century. This is the first thread.

An equally strange development took place in the field of cancer research, where the search for proof of the role of genetics in familial adenomatous polyposis, a form of cancer of the rectum and the colon, can best be understood against the backdrop of the opposition between private practitioners and institutional players like the National Health Service and St. Mark's Hospital. This is the second thread.

Both stories have in common that the historical agents—the plants and patients of the title—appear to have all but disappeared in the process. "Wheat" has been transformed into "a F4 family of 20,000 [?] plants—not one . . . homozygous," and the patient is now a case of "FAP mutation of the APC locus on chromosome 5q21." Even the genetically identical laboratory mice have turned into "FI." Palladino originally set out to restore power to those agents, to give them the voice he thought they had the right to have, if only to be able to be heard over the decennia. In doing so, from a social constructivist perspective, he got entangled in the contradictions of his own position as an engineer of historical evidence. Also, he was struck by the analogies between the genome and the archive (meaning practically all written

evidence of historical events) as a record of past developments and consequently by the analogy between the individual historian as an agent in the development of historiography as a science and the plants and patients he had been trying to restore to the scene. This is the third and final thread.

Understandably, the book has been written from a first-person perspective, probably following "Aramis, ou l'amour du technique" (Aramis, or the Love of the Technical), the famous example by Bruno Latour, and the critical, historiographical and personal levels are inextricably intertwined. This makes it difficult to follow for the reader who is not well versed in the controversies in the field of the history of science. On the other hand, it allows Palladino to write history with a message for the future or, after the dictum of Friedrich Nietzsche, "history for life."

FLUXUS EXPERIENCE

by Hannah Higgins. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, U.S.A., 2002. 260 pp., illus. ISBN: 0-520-22867-7.

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In the mid-1970s, I was sitting in an office in a Midwestern university when a colleague walked in with an out-of-town guest. I doubt if I had ever heard of Fluxus or Something Else Press, so when this person was introduced as Dick Higgins from New York, it meant nothing to me. But my interest was aroused when he held out a recently self-published book. Its outer appearance was that of a standard Bible (the title gold-stamped on a black pebbled cover, red ink on the edge of the pages, with a ribbon bookmark hanging out), but inside was a text of irreverent thoughts about art, life and what have you, titled *Foew&Ombwhnw* (now called F,O,E,W for short). I've never forgotten that book (nor Higgins), and as recently as 6 years ago, I was finally able to obtain my own copy. I have also since discovered that Higgins was interested in Merle Armitage, a maverick book designer who died the same year as Higgins's visit, and about whom I have written too. He was working on a book about Armitage, when, at age 60, Higgins died prematurely in 1998. To get to the point, Higgins was the husband of another well-known Fluxus artist,