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BOOKS

THE MOLECULAR GAZE

by Suzanne Anker and Dorothy Nelkin.
 Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press,
 Cold Spring Harbor, NY, U.S.A., 2004.
 216 pp., illus. ISBN: 0-87969-679-4.

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The Molecular Gaze surveys recent art involving biotechnology, genetics and DNA. This terrain is full of pitfalls not only because biotechnology presents profound social and ethical challenges, but also because the art under consideration does not comprise anything like a traditional school or movement. Artists have come to genetics and biotechnology by many different paths. Although these converge in art that in one way or another involves DNA, nothing like an identifiable look has resulted. Nor is this kind of art associated with any one place, even for purposes of exhibition.

Anker and Nelkin negotiate this complicated terrain with mixed success. Like many books of art commentary, *The Molecular Gaze* reads as much like a collection of notes as a work with a beginning, middle and end. The authors use art to illuminate a variety of subjects including eugenics, commodification of life, chimeras, “designer babies,” childbirth and genetic reductionism (which defines people in terms of their DNA.) There is insightful commentary on how scientific discoveries change meaning as they move out of the laboratory into the larger culture, and on how molecular vision, which has come to dominate the assumptions of the biological sciences, borrows metaphors from texts and codes.

The most provocative chapter is on the new grotesque—freakish or malformed human figures that have appeared in art over the last decade and a half. These works range from Jake and Dinos Chapman’s sculptures of conjoined children and Cindy Sherman’s dismembered mannequins to Joel-Peter Witkin’s photographs. Some of this work reflects the hopes and fears unleashed by biotechnology, but most does not, and at times the discussion wanders far afield.

The Molecular Gaze is a strikingly uneven book. It is handsomely laid out, and has more than 130 illustrations, many of them full-page and in color. But its visual wealth and many insights are mixed with misinformation and confusion. There are many factual errors. Some are minor—for example, there are two dwarfs in Velazquez’s *Las Meninas*, not one, and the most prominent one is female, not male. And—disclosure time—I was surprised to read that my own work with plants involved “fictional genomes” when actually the plant genetic systems that I work with are intractably real. Other errors would be minor if a central feature of *The Molecular Gaze* were not its investigation of relationships between art and science. Though they produce tissue culture art, Catts, Zurr and Ben-Ary are discussed in a section titled “Transgenic Art.” And, without explanation, the authors ascribe awareness of evolution to Daumier, working in the 1830s, a generation before Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*.

There are omissions, notably of Marta de Menezes, Heath Bunting, Andre Brodyk, and Karl Mihail and Tran Kim Trang. Relegated without discussion to a footnote are Brandon Ballengee, Adam Zaretsky, Natalie Jeremijenko, Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey. Computer-based genetic art, an important field, is touched on in just two short paragraphs. The most troubling omission, however, is a sense of historical and ecological perspective. *The Molecular Gaze* does not claim to be a history but includes enough history, especially in the beginning, to give the impression that the past is covered. This is far from the case. There is no mention of animal breeding for aes-

thetic purposes, and only one passing reference to plant breeding, even though these are arenas in which art and genetics have been intersecting for centuries. Steichen’s 1936 show at MOMA gets only a fleeting reference. The early literature of art and genetics is almost completely ignored. Helen and Newton Harrison are not mentioned, and ecoart is not discussed, even though much of it has genetic dimensions. The section devoted to chimeras and transgenics does not include so much as a thumbnail sketch of transgenic art’s history, all of which is recent and well within the scope of a book concerned primarily with contemporary art. Inadequate historical perspective encourages a false sense of newness about much of the work discussed.

Most art concerned with biotechnology and genetics is done in traditional mediums, and *The Molecular Gaze* appropriately gives such work a preponderance of attention. Living art, however, gets short shrift. Living art is a genuinely radical development. Until the 20th century, art was by definition made from dead matter. (Performance and landscape gardening are exceptions that prove the rule.) No painting,

Reviews Panel: Peter Anders, Fred Allan Andersson, Wilfred Arnold, Roy Ascott, Curtis Bahn, Claire Barliant, René Bekman, Roy R. Behrens, Andreas Broeckmann, Annick Bureaud, Chris Cobb, Robert Coburn, Donna Cox, Sean Cubitt, Nina Czegledy, Shawn Decker, Margaret Dolinsky, Dennis Dollens, Luisa Paraguai Donati, Victoria Duckett, Maia Engeli, Enzo Ferrara, Deborah Frizzell, Bulat M. Galejev, George Gessert, Elisa Giaccardi, Thom Gillespie, Allan Graubard, Dene Grigar, Diane Gromala, Rob Harle, Craig Harris, Josepha Haveman, Paul Hertz, Amy Ione, Stephen Jones, Richard Kade, Curtis E.A. Karnow, Nisar Keshvani, Julien Knebusch, Daniela Kutschat, Mike Legget, Roger F. Malina, Jacques Mandelbrojt, Robert A. Mitchell, Rick Mitchell, Mike Mosher, Axel Mulder, Kevin Murray, Frieder Nake, Maureen A. Nappi, Angela Ndalanis, Simone Osthoff, Jack Ox, Robert Pepperell, Kjell yngve Petersen, Cliff Pickover, Patricia Pisters, Michael Punt, Harry Rand, Sonya Rapoport, Edward Shanken, Aparna Sharma, Shirley Shor, George K. Shortess, Joel Slayton, Christa Sommerer, Yvonne Spielmann, David Surman, Pia Tikka, David Topper, Rene van Peer, Stefaan van Ryssen, Ian Versteegen, Stephen Wilson, Arthur Woods, Soh Yeong.

photograph or sculpture in stone has self-interests or value beyond what people assign it, but living art has its own interests, and, if it is sentient, its own desires quite independent of human beings. Control over living creatures means something quite different from control over inert matter. What do genetics and biotechnology imply about our relationships with other forms of life? What does it mean to bring consciousness to evolution? What roles do plants and animals play in human psychogenesis? Living art is ideally suited to engage such questions.

However, the only artist working with living things who gets anything like informed discussion is Marc Quinn, who uses living genetic art to update portraiture. Quinn is a powerful and accomplished artist, but by focusing on people, he avoids most of the questions that living art raises. In *The Molecular Gaze*, artists who do engage these questions are either not mentioned or else treated summarily. So human-centered is *The Molecular Gaze* that it could have been titled "The Anthropocentric Gaze."

Eduardo Kac is treated with a mixture of fascination and hostility. He has created several major live transgenic works, but the authors mention only *GFP Bunny*, the famous fluorescing rabbit named Alba. She is described as "allegedly luminous." Anker and Nelkin (or perhaps only Anker, since Dorothy Nelkin died before *The Molecular Gaze* was completed) repeat speculation that Alba's green color in photographs is a result of digital manipulation, and write that Alba died under "vague circumstances." The author(s) suggest that Kac may be engaged in "commercial spectacle," and allow readers to conclude that either Alba never existed or else she did not fluoresce sufficiently to photograph.

How fair is this? Throughout *The Molecular Gaze* the authors show no awareness that unverifiable claims are not unique to *GFP Bunny*, but characterize many works of art that involve DNA. No gallery-goer can see the bacteria in a David Kremers painting, or determine that they are alive, much less genetically engineered. Can we be sure that Laura Cinti's cactus has a human gene for keratin? Are the cells in Gary Schneider's photographs his, and not someone else's, or a starfish's, for that matter? Anker's own work invites such questions. Are the chromosomes depicted in *Zoosemiotics: Primates, Frog, Gazelle, Fish*, which appears on the

book jacket, really the chromosomes of those creatures? Viewers are free to dismiss any work that requires too much knowledge or faith, but we have more to gain by engaging such work on its own terms—unless, of course, there is good reason not to. A crucial test with art that involves genetics or DNA is whether an unverifiable claim is within the realm of possibility. Alba easily passes this test because, as almost everyone knows, several different kinds of animals have been genetically engineered to fluoresce. It is a minor mystery why *GFP Bunny* inspires the author(s) to indulge in attempted character assassination.

There are additional problems, but little would be gained by dwelling on them. This book would have been better if it had been either more ambitious, and covered more territory, or else more modest, and stuck to what the authors know best: the new grotesque, birth, and the metaphors by which we understand molecular biology. By trying to be comprehensive without doing the necessary work, *The Molecular Gaze* ends up being at times both untrustworthy and out of touch.

The Molecular Gaze includes sufficient information to be useful as a reference, but only for those who already know the subject extremely well. For those who do not, the pictures are valuable, but even here one must proceed with some caution. The photograph of mice with fluorescing ears and tails that is juxtaposed with Alba represents only one kind of GFP mice. There are others with much more uniform fluorescence.

CLOSE READING NEW MEDIA: ANALYZING ELECTRONIC MEDIA

by Jan Van Looy and Jan Baetens.
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2003. 185 pp., illus. Paper.
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It is no little irony that hypertext literature, which places so much responsibility on the reader to plot each unique reading path and participate in a work's unfolding, requires careful attention to a work of literature at a time when information overload demands an increase in the speed at which we take in that information and when literary scholars have rejected epistemologies

built upon the close study of texts. Anyone who has ever tried to breeze through Talan Memmot's *Lexia to Perplexia* or Stephanie Strickland's *Ballad of Sand and Harry Soot*, therefore, should get the gist of Jan Van Looy and Jan Baetens's argument for a close reading of new media in their collection, *Close Reading New Media: Analyzing Electronic Literature*.

This kind of approach to "texts," however, runs counter to postmodern approaches where theorizing about literature takes precedent over the works themselves and debates over meaning and truth have rendered any meaning and any truth nonexistent. But Van Looy and Baetens' view of close reading holds that it "does not aim to produce *the* meaning of *the* text, but rather to unearth all possible types of ambiguities and irony" (p. 8, authors' emphasis). In this approach they share much in common with literary translators and textual studies scholars who have long argued that the process of careful reading is necessary for the production of a translation or a concordance, for example. But it is, instead, to the semiotics of Jacques Fontanille and the media philosophy of Stanley Cavell, as well as theories suggested by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, Marie-Laure Ryan and Lev Manovich, that the authors turn to for support, rather than to New Critics who also argue for close readings of texts. And as such, Van Looy and Baetens place electronic literature squarely into new media rather than literature—a view of electronic literature, of course, suggested in the book's title.

The book is actually a collection of nine essays divided into three sections—Hypertext, Internet Text and Cyber-text—with each section containing three essays. And so, in the first section, one finds analyses of Strickland's *True North*, Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* and M.D. Coverley's *Califia*. Section Two offers essays on Geoff Ryman's *253* and Rick Pryll's *Lies*, Raymond Federman and Anne Burdick's *Eating Books*, and another on Ryman's *253*. The final section focuses on Darren Aronofsky's web site for his film *Requiem for a Dream*; the interface for *ebr* (*electronic book review*); and the theoretical views underlying *Grammatron*, by its author Mark Amerika.

It is not clear why Van Looy and Baetens have organized the book in this way. Certainly this reviewer cannot see a discernible rationale for breaking up the essays in sections one and two, since