

***The Aesthetic Fate of the Body: Where Transhumanism Places the Body in the Art Medium & the Ethics Governing This Relationship***

**Diana Rishani, American University Beirut**

**Abstract**

The living being in itself has become the centerpiece of a specific genre of art: bioart. Life is manipulated, transfigured, deconstructed, and recreated by the hands of artists who have embraced science as her tool in the medium of aesthetics. However, “Bioart is still a very loose term, and is applied to many art forms that relate in some way to biology, biotechnology and life” (Zurr and Catts 2003). The physicality of life has become both the medium and the object of meaning, intertwined within a specific sociocultural topic of relevance. We can place the body, especially of the human, into an analysis led by a Transhumanist perspective within the context of art and ethics.

**Transhumanism and Bioart**

“Bioart and its subsets are working with genetics, cloning and hybridization, and its practitioners are ‘co-creators’ alongside the gods, stirring up moral issues, and portraying the role of lab-technician, scalpel in hand” (Vita-More 2012). Bioart has relocated the human body from the source of action unto the canvas; from the creator to the object of creation. The body now stands on its own independent from the specific act of being reserved only for humans and the bodies of humans. The philosophy of transhumanism can be found within this form of art: transcendence from the physicality that roots humans to mortality and thus limiting progress and the act of self-transformation. Julian Huxley, Aldous Huxley’s brother, first coined the term (1927):

The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself — not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual there in another way — but in its entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps transhumanism will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature.

Nietzsche’s concept of the *Übermensch* holds similarities with that of Transhumanism, except the latter takes transcendence a step further to truly place the every aspect of the act of being under the control of the *Übermensch*. The *Übermensch* is now a cyborg who has denounced the afterlife by denouncing mortality. All aspects of life, including the physical, are ready to be reaffirmed by the Transhumanist *Übermensch*. Nietzsche devalued the spiritual afterlife in order to reaffirm the physical life and the actions that give identity to our being; instead the Transhumanist Nietzsche would be forced to also denounce the flesh for a more transcendental form of being on the physical earth.

Therefore, Transhumanism devalues the flesh of the human and regards it as barrier to a process of self-fulfilment and self-transformation. “Transhumanization proposes an intervention of biology in modifying corporeality, extending the biological lifespan, and preserving the brain by transfer onto non-biological platforms” (Vita-More 2013, 20).

However, the philosophy of Transhumanism inverts its degradation of the human body when in context of aesthetics and bioart. Instead, it is the body that is the medium of meaning in the art piece. According to Transhumanism, the body would no longer be a necessity and instead it is chosen to hold aesthetic value and meaning; bringing value to body by means of intentionality. Though, if the value is the extent of how bioart can “engage the idea of life extension” (Vita-More 2012, 204), that is, to go in accordance to Transhumanism philosophy, then the value is diminished once Transhumanism achieved. Nonetheless, this does not limit different intentionality of meaning to also give value to the body independent of the main Transhumanistic agenda. So, if Transhumanism is achieved the body would be as equivalent to clay in the realms of art and aesthetics. But, bioart exists within a socio-cultural context and therefore the value of the body is that of the thoughts it induces.

## **Future**

Art has always been under the influence of its socio-cultural surrounds and bioart is no different. “Bio Art has not unfolded and developed in accordance with prescribed master codes of a determinant post-avant-garde manifesto; instead, it has been subject to a process of social drift and diverse influences from its aesthetic environment” (Hauser 2005). The scientific development, especially which presents the idea of a human transcendence beyond the mortality of the body, has triggered an artistic response. This pseudo-scientific endeavour of bioart is meant to envision the future of mankind and the way life would be. Science fiction movies and novels have always imagined the possible future world; either a utopia or a dystopia. Art creates a possible version of the future in accordance to the technological advances found in the present environment, yet taking it a step forward. However, bioart has a limitation of presentation. Unlike film, illustrations, and novels, bioart requires the artist to dwell into laboratories and the science of the living organism under artistic manipulation in order to create the vision in mind. Therefore, in a way, the bioartists are questioning and testing the extent of the malleability of science in manipulating aspects of life using present techniques, and at times innovating ones of their own. They are invoking thought concerning the imminent future of the body; they might condemn and fear the path of which science is taking or instead embrace it and the take the offer of being a god.

## **Present**

Other than demanding thoughts from their audiences about the future, many bioartists use their art in an attempt to build a controversy about issues happening now. Performance artist Jacqueline Traide placed herself in the position of a test lab animal and underwent

ten hours of ‘testing’ in front of a live audience of shoppers. She aimed to reveal the behind-closed-doors experiences of these animals to the public in an attempt to support stopping testing cosmetics on animals (Zimmerman 2012). Another example is Abramovic’s “Rhythm 0”:

In “Rhythm 0,” her first long durational work, Abramovic offered herself as an object of experimentation for the audience, thereby including their actions in the performance itself.

Abramovic remained completely passive for six hours in front of a table containing 72 objects. Some, such as sugar, honey, and a rose contained the potential for pleasure. Others such as knives, whips, scissors, and a gun (with a single bullet) contained the potential for torment. The nature of the performance was completely in the audience’s hands (Marina Abramovic Institute 1974).

Abramovic’s performance at some point turned violent when the audience members used sharp and harmful objects against her body. This performance reconceptualised the nature of modern human beings in the context of society. The idea that this art audience was capable of harm to a defenceless body contradicted the established notion of modern man. As well, bioartists have gone further to completely recreate organisms and modify them as they please, as Eduardo Kac’s genetically modified rabbit, Alba (2000). They are dwelling into the genetics either to create monstrosities as a sign of imminent condemnation, or instead, to offer a transhumanistic possibility of the future.

## **Ethics**

### *Of the Human Body*

Bioartists have the capabilities to play the god of other living organisms, as well as themselves. Some have not excluded the possibility that their own body could become a canvas for their expression. When considering one’s own body in the medium of art, a John Stuart Mill-ian approach should be taken: “The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it. Each is the proper guardian of his own health, whether bodily, or mental or spiritual”. In a way, bioart of the self can be analogous with the act of suicide. Some may argue that suicide is not a purely individualistic act since it influences people around that individual and the society that contains her. However, if we take into consideration the effect of every individualistic act on the surroundings, then the concept of liberty and freedom is deeply hindered. Therefore, an artist, who supposedly is a “free and rational agent” in Kantian terms, should be able to express the utopic/dystopic or even nihilistic notions.

There is another ethical dilemma when the body is no longer that of the artist herself; instead it is that of another human. This issue can be separated into situations: one dealing with the post-mortem body, and the other dealing with the living body. The case of post-mortem is much less complicated than that of the living being. If given prior consent, then the artist is given full access over the body- to deconstruct, disfigure, twist, and finally impregnate it with an idea. The dead flesh is no longer the person; a fact accepted by both the artist and the pre-mortem owner of the body. Yet, even though the pile of flesh is no longer a person, it does not stop the artist from attributing a personhood to that piece of physicality. In the end it is a concept, and the body is the vehicle that delivers it across. Even though bioart deals with the living, one can still argue that there would still exist some alternate form of life within the corpse, as cells, bacteria etc. Science utilizes corpses as well, but only does so in the hope of accessing new knowledge. In a society that values scientific knowledge over aesthetics, the bioartist's work on unidentified corpses seems much more problematic than that of the scientist's. The bioartist's, as an artist, has no pragmatic purpose to art, instead the art is a medium of the propagation of aesthetics and perhaps a vision. However, secondary knowledge is generated in the process of making bioart. Such knowledge is needed in order to successfully modify the body in the ways the artist has imagined, yet the generation of this knowledge is not always a given. Honoré Fragonard “invented a strange technique to preserve corpses. He made anatomical preparations – animal and ... human – called *écorchés*. These were then staged with a genuine artistic will” ([Donjean 2011](#)). The techniques served the purpose of the art, and their creation was not aimed to produce a body of scientific knowledge, all of which grants more criticism to the use of science and resources for no obvious and practical results.

The discussion turns critical when the bodies are no longer at halt by death; it is the living flesh that seems to invoke serious concerns especially since the body belongs to another individual. We are under the assumption that bioartists exist within the modern Western societies of today, and thus the individuals residing in these societies are considered to be citizens with granted rights. Therefore, donating your living body to the creative process of art has many ethical and legal limitations.

Bioart lays down the human body and allows the artist full access in manipulating the physical to mimic the notions and ideas of the artistic creation sought after. It is true that the individual at first must be free in deciding to undergo an obscure artistic process, however limitations must be set. If this donation process occurs in a territory ruled by some form of governmental authority, then there should be a legal contract protecting the ‘future’ individual in that process. This contract is especially relevant in cases when the individual, whom the art is acted upon, decides to stop. Therefore, this legal document protects the individual from undesirable actions. However, there is also a scenario in which there is a trespassing of rights, yet under the individual's consent. Here the artist is only faced with a legal limitation, one that holds people accountable when rights are trespassed. But, referring back to John Stuart Mill's concept of personal liberty, no governmental interference should be allowed in cases of consent. Yet, this does not

prevent the individual from seeking an exit strategy in the form of a legal contract in which details can be specified accordingly. Of course, the artistic process is hindered when priority is given to the rights of the individual.

Whereas in territories where no obvious definition is given to human beings, in terms of rights, the only limitation is that of the artist's morality. In such a case, either the individual or the aesthetics must be sacrificed, and since no authority exists to secure the rights of the individual, a significant possibility would exist of having the aesthetics picked over the individual. Therefore, since there is no possible way to guarantee the safety of an individual outside of governmental territories, the individual must tread lightly when entering beyond the boundaries of safety set up by societies.

A further ethical dilemma rises when bioart deals with the issue of personhood. Since Transhumanism is not yet reached and the human is still encapsulated within a body of flesh, there is no definite distinction between the person and the body; it is still part of the human identity. Therefore when a bioartist manipulates the body and treats it as a canvas for aesthetic creation, objectification is in process. This contradicts the notion of human equality which is supposedly accepted, yet not respected, by most people and their states. However, the value of personhood is easily compromised for the aesthetic and artistic outcomes, even for a monetary one. Objectification is not taken as seriously as, for example, the violations of rights and the abuse of the body. It even occurs daily in mass media for the purpose of selling products. When dealing with bioart, the metaphysical argument of objectification does not hold much impact as that of the possibility of physical harm and deformation.

### *Of the Living Body*

Bioart and its techniques raise questions concerning the vague distinction between humans and the 'Other' organisms.

The separation in definitions between "us" (or "I") and what is the "other" is not as evident as we would generally like to think. We are not advocating homogeneity, or exclusion of differences, but rather suggesting that our well established cultural dichotomies between self/other are shifting and the emphasis on differences are now being relocated in the continuum of life (Zurr and Catts 2003).

The bioartists utilize all forms of living organisms freely in order to construct their desired art, all in accordance to a hierarchy in which humans have placed themselves at the top.

The hierarchy exists due to different ideologies separating life forms in accordance to specific properties seem to continually emerge. Lists and characteristics have been trying

to pin down the definition of life, yet there always seems to be a misfit which challenges the entire boundaries of what life is supposed to be.

In trying to define life, we have drawn a line at an arbitrary level of complexity and declared that everything above that border is alive and everything below it is not. In truth, this division does not exist outside the mind. There is no threshold at which a collection of atoms suddenly becomes alive, no categorical distinction between the living and inanimate, no Frankensteinian spark. We have failed to define life because there was never anything to define in the first place (Jabr 2013).

Therefore, having no definition to withhold the presumed hierarchy on its shoulders, man is forced unto a flat plane of equality along with all other creatures. Bioart has been criticized for firmly holding on to that hierarchal position; a position which allows the artist to use organisms found 'lower' in the hierarchy at their disposal. But more trouble arises when the organisms used in the art is closer to the human borderline, due to a stronger identification with the ability to suffer the closer the creature is on the constructed scale of superiority. However, Peter Singer (2002, 35) states that: "If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering — insofar as rough comparison can be made — of any other being." Bioartists are accused of speciesism for presuming power to manipulate other organisms without taking into account their suffering and perhaps, freedom and will. However, the boundary which separates the sentient beings from those incapable of suffering seems to be vague, as Singer (2002, 35) continues: "So the limit of sentience (using the term as convenient if not strictly accurate shorthand for the capacity to suffer and/or experience enjoyment) is the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others. To mark this boundary by some other characteristic like intelligence or rationality would be to mark it in an arbitrary manner." Therefore, bioartists are treading lightly when manipulating organisms 'low' in the hierarchy, since the label of 'sentience' cannot be quickly stripped away as far as science knows.

### *Of Playing God*

The argument that bioartists are attempting to take on the role of God should not be taken into much consideration. This argument goes in accordance with the one that states nature should not be tempered with, especially by those who are led by their creativity into creation. However, we should reassess the value given to 'Nature' in comparison to the 'Unnatural'. The nature of a thing is the end-product of the process it underwent, and evolution is an example of that. As well, human beings themselves are 'natural' since they are an example of creation of the universe, and it should follow that what humans create should also be 'natural'- the resources, the medium, and even the neurological connections making up the human brain and thus the ideas are from the same source of

everything else. Transhumanism even demands the act of transcending any human-made barrier, and therefore bioart should easily dismiss criticism of such kind.

## Conclusion

There are many fears and ethical issues that hover around the topic of bioart, but nonetheless it has come into being and triggered multiple reactionary acts. Bioart could push Transhumanism a step further by manipulating the living in the goal of achieving a trans-life. It is continuing to gather ethical criticism, yet it is expanding the discussions on the future of many fields. It offers a way through which visionary ideas directed towards life, society, and the future can be creatively assessed and re-invented — it, however, does not play safe.

**Contact details: [diana.rishani@gmail.com](mailto:diana.rishani@gmail.com)**

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