

EXIT ART

Corpus Extremus (LIFE+)
February 28 – April 18, 2009

An Introduction: Matters of Life and Death

By Mary Anne Staniszewski

Our use of biotechnology is transforming human nature. Genetic research, organ and molecular transplants, and interspecies mixing are just some of the new scientific techniques that are altering our definitions of life and death and what it means to be human. Corporate and government patenting of genetic materials and processes has not only wed the workings of global capitalism and the nation state within so many of us, but within our descendants as well. We have entered a new biotechnological frontier for all living things. What is now becoming commonplace for the human body would have been in recent memory impossible, a scientific and poetic fantasy, a *Corpus Extremus*.

The artists in this exhibition are taking on the realities and questions of our biotech present and future. Representative of a relatively new international development, these artists and teams of researchers are breaking new ground. Uniting science and art, they are producing new genres (like BioArt), using new media (such as tissue cultures), and creating new types of studios that are hybrid atelier and lab. Many are working from art-science research nodes – communities of artists linked to universities that provide opportunities to collaborate with scientists and access resources needed for this type of experimentation. These collaborations are often self-consciously mounted to counter business as usual in biotech global capitalism and a mainstream art world where the market has too often become the meaning.

Most of the practitioners involved in this show are attempting to enrich poetic and aesthetic possibilities; highlight ethical, political and philosophical concerns in both scientific and cultural spheres; and critique media representations of what these "advances" mean in what some might call the biotech era. The exhibition and programming are a recombinant mix of the poetic, political, fantastic, clinical, ironic and utopian. Although united by a deadly serious subject, humor marks a number of the entries. The "Life+" of the title is reference to the engaged, analytical yet life-affirming character of so many of the projects included in the show.

The genesis of *Corpus Extremus (Life+)* began several years ago when Boryana Rossa, who is currently working on a Ph.D. in the Electronic Arts at Rensselaer, wanted to do research with me on an exhibition exploring questions of life and

death and new media- and bio- technologies – issues I am particularly interested in and which relate to a book I am writing. Rossa had been exploring these areas as an artist and as part of her coursework with Kathy High. I brought the idea to co-directors Jeanette Ingberman and Papo Colo and we thought this would be an important and timely project for Exit Art, given its commitment to art and science programming. The show was intended to be the first exhibition of Exit Art's Curatorial Incubator Program, which supports young and emerging curators and scholars in contemporary art. Due to the challenges of mounting such an unusual show, *Corpus Extremus (LIFE+)* was delayed and it is the second exhibition of the Program.

Corpus Extremus (LIFE+) is representative of the second-generation of art exhibitions, festivals and experiments dealing with the so-called genetic "revolution." Although artists have been working on related issues for decades, the first recognizable wave of experimentation was approximately ten years ago. The first full-scale show to deal with this subject in the United States, Exit Art's *Paradise Now: Picturing the Genetic Revolution*, was held in 2000 and guest curated by Marvin Heiferman and Carole Kismaric. Both *Corpus Extremus (LIFE+)* and *Paradise Now* are part of Exit Art's Unknown Territories series, which is intended to explore the impact of scientific advances on contemporary culture.

The projects comprising *Corpus Extremus (LIFE+)* might be considered a new species of what we consider to be fine art. The boundaries between art and life that distinguishes aesthetic practice in the modern era are here pushed to a literal extreme. A majority of the projects involve living materials, animals, plants, insects, bacteria, and even human genes (those injected into transgenic rats). The studio as laboratory and the artist as scientist and engineer that have characterized so much of cultural production for the past one hundred years are no longer metaphors or aspirations, but are fully realized. But despite the fact that the work included in *Corpus Extremus (LIFE+)* may seem to be on the boundaries of the mainstream art world and involve highly specialized knowledge, the exhibition and its programming are dealing with some of society's most visible controversies and questions that are now everywhere, inescapable, and in plain sight. It is inevitable that biotech research and marketing will continue to alter our sense of our humanity and our relation to other life forms. The artists included in this show are among those who feel compelled to engage with these seismic transformations in our present and future.

– Mary Anne Staniszewski

