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Bio-art goes on show at School of Fine Arts

Exhibit explores growing movement merging art, biotechnology

'The Year of the Tiger' by Daniel Lee, 1993. Part of the 'Manimals' series.

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When Aldous Huxley wrote in "Brave New World" of test tubes as incubators for human embryos, it was pure science fiction. Less than a century later, the advances made in biotechnology and the development of in-vitro fertilization bring Huxley's outlandish ideas closer to reality.

More than ever before, progress in the fields of science and biotechnology is closing the gap between the imagined and the real but also changing the relationship between the natural and the artificial.

Experiments in genetics, cloning and the decoding of DNA are opening the way to new forms of life. Is man going to look different from what he does today in the future? It's a fascinating yet slightly disturbing question.

This probably explains why "In Vivo - In Vitro" — an exhibition on "bio-art" currently being hosted by the Athens School of Fine Arts in collaboration with the non-govermental organization ARTOPOS (www.artopos.org) and new media art curator Anna Hatziyiannaki — leaves the viewer with an overwhelming yet melancholy feeling.

An unusual exhibition that merges art and biotechnology, "In Vivo - In Vitro" and its curator Hatziyiannaki introduce the Greek public to bio-art, a recent development in contemporary art which is based on biotechnologies. It is a movement in art that grew out of the US about 20 years ago (a dynamic group of Australian bio-artists has emerged recently), gathered momentum about 10 years ago but has become more broadly known only in recent years through seminal exhibitions such as "Paradise Now," which heralded in the new millennium in the United States. The exhibition in Athens is the second large European exhibition on bio-art and although not all-inclusive presents some of the most well-known names in the field. These include Stelarc, a performance artist who uses robotic inventions in his work, Eduardo Kac, known for his telepresence and bioletematic works (one of his works is the controversial, genetically engineered rabbit), the group of artists known as Tissue Culture and Art Projects, Critical Art Ensemble, an activist group which has done much work on genetically altered food, Joe Davis, Karl Sims, Eva Sutton, Daniel Lee, Susan Alexjander and Polona Tratnik (the only European artist included in the exhibition).

Bio-art centers on the developments in biotechnology and is often related to actual experiments either on living organisms or artificial life. Bio-artists usually work in collaboration with scientific laboratories and explore issues such as living tissue culture, morphologic modifications and genetics. Their work helps create an awareness of the development of science but also points to complicated technological, ethical and social questions.

From an artistic point of view, their work spurs thought on how aesthetically interesting or different a biotechnology-related subject can be. In the art field, is bio-art as novel and radical as biotechnology is in the field of science?

A growing yet still marginal art form, bio-art baffles the viewer. In many cases, one feels lost in a mysterious scientific context. To know of the experiments on which each work is based helps a lot in understanding the works, yet that means the viewer has to carefully read each explanatory panel before fully enjoying the work's visual aspect.

Considering bio-art is a relatively new art form, this extra attention is justifiable. Yet the aesthetic criteria for describing bio-art still remain elusive. Somewhere between popular science and art, the exhibition seems like the visual version of a science-fiction novel even though most of the experiments that the works address are actually conducted in scientific laboratories.

Hybridity is a recurring concept. The work that greets the visitor is “Manimals” by artist Daniel Lee, a series of human portraits that look like a cross between animals and humans and are named after Chinese astrology. It is a rather disconcerting image casting humans as demi-monsters but it also reassures by pointing to the origins of the human species.

It is a species that is gaining increasingly more control over life and is actually determining its own biological existence. In a video by Daniel Lee which features pigs dressed as humans, the captions explain how ongoing experiments are allowing man to decode animal DNA and use pigs as organ donors.

Critical Art Ensemble appropriates a painting of Venus by the Renaissance master Bronzino to describe an imaginary female body and speculate on how fertility and sexuality might be differentiated in the future. Karl Sims has created an elaborate, visually fascinating digital-technology work on the notion of panspermia, a theory which holds that life exists and is distributed in the universe in the form of germs or spores. It is a visually fascinating work that immerses the viewer in an unfathomable world of wonder.

Stelarc together with Tissue Culture and Art Project have created “Extra Ear, 1/4.” They took tissue from the artist’s skin and cultivated it, through various surgical methods, into the shape of a small ear. The idea is that the ear may be attached as a prosthetic to his arm. Another goal is to create a semi-alive sculpture-portrait of the artist bearing this ear.

The fact that biological microorganisms are often involved in the making of bio-art raises a controversial ethical issue. This alone adds to the complicated and evasive nature of bio-art.

But even if one wishes to stay outside such issues, bio-art is still hard to take in. Those not versed in science may have some difficulty understanding the content of the works (a catalog would have helped) and may feel put off by the alienating creatures and forms of bio-art.

For those outside the science laboratories, this is an unknown world. Maybe the language of art is a way of bringing it closer to us.

After all, both art and science have something in common: imagination. The question is, will art have a place in a future world imagined by science? The slightly eerie feeling that “In Vivo - In Vitro” puts across to the viewer brings thoughts of an inhuman, scary world. Maybe this is because of an existential fear of the unknown. Maybe not. After all, the world that Huxley imagined is not that bad after all, at least not yet.

“In Vivo - In Vitro” at the Nikos Kessanlis Exhibition Hall of the Athens School of Fine Arts (256 Pireos, 210.480.1315) through March 10. The exhibition is held under the aegis of the Pasteur Institute and in collaboration with the New Technologies Department of Athens University. A one-day conference is set for February 24.