Curator’s Note

The notion of a biological agent is an equivocal one. On hearing the term we are likely to think of infective viruses or bacteria produced for the express purpose of making others sick. Of course, the weaponizing of life in this way is not the volition of the infectious “agent” itself. The microbes are causes without choices, simply the means to a more nefarious end for which another kind of biological agent—a human one—who has intentionally designed and manufactured them. But these two conceptions of “agents” and what willful agency they may possess become more difficult to categorize in the wider context, which also includes agencies of the state and federal sort as well such as the Defense Department or FBI. Two cases this past summer—that of Defense lab scientist Bruce Ivins, his suicide, and his murky connection to the anthrax poisonings of 2001 on the one hand, and the long-awaited dismissal of charges against artist Steve Kurtz on alleged “bioterrorist” connections to the work of Critical Art Ensemble on the other—can be seen as bookends to the range of fears, complexities, and relations of power tied up in biotechnology.

Viewed in an ecological context, however, it is increasingly apparent that biotechnology is just one of many elements within a much broader system. As our understanding of ecological dynamics grows we see that any factor that significantly alters the function of ecosystems by way of pollution, disease, or the balance of species is a matter of real biological concern. Rather than simply assuming we are “perpetrators” on Nature or “victims” of it, we have begun to understand more accurately the role we play as potent links in an environmental network of causes and effects. In this light, our perceptions of and daily engagements with non-human organisms confront us with ethical and agential questions as pressing and nuanced as those posed by biotechnological innovation.

These biological matters preoccupy both artists and the public-at-large, although they are typically expressed and addressed on very different terms. For example, the gallery focus of much “bio-art” and the mutations of scientific language that characterizes its discourse may do little toward bridging the gap between the public and the concerns they confront in contemporary biology. At times distinguishing between what is commentary, critique, or simply fetishization of the biological becomes increasingly difficult, only reinforcing the divide between certain forms of bio-art and the public audiences it is intended to engage.

The three artists featured in Biological Agents—Brandon Ballangée, Caitlin Berrigan, and Natalie Jeremijenko—present intriguing and proactive models of practice that engage the biological in ways that require the intimate participation of both organisms and the public in equal measure. Through direct collaborations in the field and in the gallery, they connect our multiple roles as biological hosts and biological agents alike. Their work succeeds in carefully, critically, and humorously exploring what it means to be human, to be animal, and to have personal and social agency in the complex ecologies we are all a part of.

-Andrew Yang & Christa Donner
Brandon Ballengée

Exploring the boundaries between art, science and technology, Brandon Ballengée creates multidisciplinary works out of information generated from ecological field trips and laboratory research. Since 1996, Ballengée has collaborated with numerous scientists to conduct primary biological research and create ecological artworks. A particular area of study is the occurrence of malformation and global declines of amphibians, highlighted here in the *Biological Agents* exhibit. Collaborating with biologists, he has documented these animals using scientific staining techniques that both visualize and aesthetically transform their biology in ways otherwise unknowable. Ballengée’s project in Britain this past year, “MALAMP UK” (for “MALformed AM-Phibian”) continued this research site-specifically to examine the status of amphibian life in Yorkshire. Working with local residents in the field, Ballengée extends to notion of “bio-art” practice out of the gallery as well as into the realm of primary scientific research.

Ballengée’s work has been exhibited in Australia, Asia, Europe and the Americas. Recent solo exhibitions of his work were held at The Arsenal Gallery in Central Park (NYC), The Peabody Museum of Natural History (Yale University), Archibald Arts (NYC), and Kunstverein Ingolstadt in Germany. He participated in the 2004 Geumgang Nature Art Biennale in Kung Ju, South Korea the Waterways Project installed at the 2005 Venice Biennale, Biennale for Electronic Arts Perth, Australia 07, and film screenings of the 3rd Moscow Biennale in Russia.

Caitlin Berrigan

Caitlin Berrigan is an artist who works in tactile and edible sculpture, immersive installation, electronic media and interactive performance. Her works address the ruptures & confluences of the body’s grotesque form, its medicalization, and many variations as object of desire. The results are quietly disturbing works of subtle humor & irony that speak to our violent and conflicted relationship to the body. Berrigan is often inspired by materials that resemble or hyperbolize organic bodies. Yet the materials she employs—food, perishables, video, wax, plastics, rubbers, stains—possess a distinct odor, tactility or elastic property that triggers a sensual and primal experience in viewers that is equally important to the piece as its conceptual component.

For this show, Berrigan combines her recent “Viral Shelter” (2007-08) and “Viral Confections” (2006-07) projects, creating intimate, virally-structured space within the gallery where visitors are invited to consume edible chocolates shaped into the molecular structure of the hepatitis C virus. A carrier of the virus herself, Berrigan uses shelter and sweets in an attempt to domesticate and befriend her untamed disease. For the opening-night performance, Berrigan shares her handmade chocolates with visitors in exchange for personal dialogue, about this prevalent and underrepresented disease.

She has presented her work in the Whitney Museum’s Initial Public Offerings, Storefront for Art & Architecture in New York, Dumbo Art Under the Bridge Festival, the National Museum of Women in the Arts in D.C., Stuttgart New Media Festival and the Center for Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv among other venues and festivals.
Natalie Jeremijenko

Natalie Jeremijenko works at the intersection of contemporary art, science, and engineering. Her practice takes many forms that include large-scale public art works, tangible media installations, single channel tapes, and critical writings that investigate the complex interactions between animals, humans, and technology in contemporary nature.

“Peace Declaration for Pigeons” is a site-specific revisiting of an installation which debuted in 2006 as Whitney Biennial For the Birds (WB4B). The custom bird perches operate as a form of public experiment designed to facilitate human bird communication, translating into human dialect some of the birds concerns and arguments. From the birds’ point of view, they provide an experimental platform to observe which perch/noise/arguments are effective in convincing people to share resources.

Also featured are two components of Jeremijenko’s “Environmental Health Clinic”, which looks at health within the context of its reliance on the environments we inhabit. Jeremijenko describes the project:

The clinic works like this: you make an appointment, just like you would at a traditional health clinic, to talk about your particular environmental health concerns. What differs is that you walk out with a prescription not for pharmaceuticals but for actions: local data collection and urban interventions directed at understanding and improving your environmental health; plus referrals, not to medical specialists but to specific art, design and participatory projects, local environmental organizations and local government or civil society groups: organizations that can use the data and actions prescribed as legitimate forms of participation to promote social change.

For Biological Agents Jeremijenko introduces two model prescriptions from this project: “Keeping TaBs” employs tadpoles to explore the recent controversy over Lake Michigan water quality in the context of BP’s desire to increase pollution output into the lake from its Whiting, Indiana refinery. Another “I Love Chicago and Chicago Loves Me” addresses the phenomenon of coyotes finding their way into cities in the early spring—including a recent instance on the UIC campus—offering them refuge while calling attention to the ecological changes driving them into urban environments.
Knowledge Virus Research Station

Personal agency is as much a matter of access to information and resources as it is about decision-making. For this reason, an important component to the Biological Agency exhibit is the Knowledge Virus Research Station, an area in the gallery that makes artist-made resources available for public use and dissemination: zines, brochures, DVDs, and an internet kiosk linked to sites focusing on various biological and educational initiatives as well as information on biological topics from a variety of creative perspectives. The resources included in this section are produced by artists, scientists, students, and everyday people with an interest in biological topics. Featured works include Vladmaster’s handmade view-master reels about cockroach life, Ryan Griffis’ Invasive Irrigation kits (*still pending), comics and zines by Andrew Oleksiuk, Grant Reynolds, Leda Zawacki, and Alhena Katsoff, a digital station linking to online projects by FutureFarmers, the Center for Land Use Interpretation, Critical Art Ensemble and others, as well as publications produced through the Small Science Collective, which publishes creative brochures created by biology and entomology students at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Related Events:

Wednesday, October 22, 6:00pm, Gallery 400 Lecture Room
Screening of Strange Culture by Lynn Hershman Leeson, film about Critical Art Ensemble and Steve Kurtz, and Marching Plague by Critical Art Ensemble, to be followed by discussion with Claire Pentecost

Wednesday, November 5, 3:30-5:30pm, UIC’s Humanities Institute (lower level Stevenson Hall)
Panel Discussion with Lori Andrews, Chicago-Kent College of Law, IIT; Lennard Davis, UIC Project Biocultures and Professor of English, Disability Studies and Medical Education; and Andy Yang, exhibition co-curator and biologist. Moderator TBA.
Biological Agents: Artistic Engagements in our Growing Bio-Culture
Curated by Christa Donner and Andrew Yang

October 14-November 22, 2008

Opening Reception: Wednesday, October 15, 5-8 pm

The complexities of our contemporary life fundamentally challenge the way we understand ourselves as biological entities within larger ecosystems. Biological Agents focuses on the work of Brandon Ballengére, Caitlin Benigan, and Natalie Janzenenko: three artists who engage the intimate participation of organisms and the public alike, examining what it means to be human, to be animal, to have personal and social agency. The companion Knowledge Virus Research Station offers information on biological topics from a variety of creative perspectives.

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Primary support for Biological Agents has been provided by the College of Architecture and the Arts, UIC, UIC Project Bio-cultures, and a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency. Additional support provided by College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, UIC, Department of Biology and Department of English.

The Daryl Geller Sticks and Jeff Sticks Voices Series Fund provides general support to Gallery 400 programs.