

Tech Flesh 6: An Interview with Melinda Rackham

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CTheory: Your net.art work *Carrier* deals with bodies on a molecular level, as well as the ways in which bodies are by turns parasitic, symbiotic, immuno-resistant. How do these "bodies" you create respond to something like the human genome project?

Melinda Rackham: My viral bodies, my infectious agents are all about steaming open protoplasmic envelopes, penetrating cellular cores, crossing species boundaries, and shattering illusions of the discrete autonomy of ourselves, where as the genome project seeks to classify and contain and control our bodies through the parameters of a data set [.. this is my DNA It starts and ends between these signs ..]

We are all coded and constructed from identical machine language, but as humanity we don't exist in isolation, separation and distillation sanitised and disembodied information. On a very pragmatic level bodies are never stable, they are in constant states of transition in relation to everything around them, and can't really be extrapolated from a sample.

Bodies probably come closest to being stable when they are dead when I was an undergraduate art student my drawing teacher took us to an anatomy laboratory where we were presented with bodies and body sections with the skin nicely peeled back to expose the musculature and skeleton, beautifully arranged on stainless steel tables, for us to draw as still lives. I was shocked, then I was fascinated by the beauty of the meat without its animating fluid, and by the fact that artists are the only people society permits to view /use these body parts apart from medical students and researchers.

This studying of life by proximity to death, or more precisely to chemical filled replicants of human bodies, is a most clear illustration of how scientific /medical research projects like genome deals with the body as a separate and fixed entity disavowing the reality of warm viscous pulsing different bodies that are we.

CTheory: Biotech has been increasingly merging with computer tech, the biological with the informational. What is the role of the biosciences such as genetics and immunology in your work, which also focuses on the use of new media and computer tech?

Melinda Rackham: As a net.artist I make works about my network relations to the world outside myself so sex, relationships, disease, computers, and the experience

of living on the net become my topics. I started researching immunology and biotech as I have Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) and I wanted to know what was happening in my own body on a cellular level, and why having an incurable illness and being "sick" and "contagious" often meant I was being treated as a "morally inferior" person by society.

Foucault talked about the "imperative to health" where we strive to be clean, sanitary, self-contained, healthy units which keep the machinery of society rolling along. Deleuze and Guattari talked about the need to be an organised organism, "you will articulate your body, otherwise you are just depraved". To be ill is to deviate from "normal", and I see biotechnological research blindly following a pathway which seeks to eliminate difference and disease without understanding why. It's the same as genetic modification of crops on some misguided notion that one variety is superior and sameness will be beneficial. While obviously this is biologically and environmentally dangerous in terms of species survival, it's psychologically dangerous as well. I see it on the net in avatar representation in virtualscapes. Users all want to look a certain way tall, white, and surgically enhanced.

What I am really interested in is the stuff that biotech is trying to eliminate that is variety, sickness, ugliness, or any other hideous monstrosities, which we are told as children by the parental biotech corporate body to avoid.

CTheory: As an artist, how do you approach a scientific field such as genetics and genomics? Do you see yourself reponding to the sciences, critiquing the sciences, modifying the sciences?

Melinda Rackham: The sciences as models for viewing the world are no more or less valid than daytime television, so I approach them in the same way looking for essence to extract, for metaphors that will translate across other platforms. I'm just a likely to pull a thread of an idea from *The Hot Zone*, which eroticizes the Ebola virus, as from *Germinal Life* it's all data to be recombined for my own ends. As an artist and writer I get to play goddess with imaginal and textual code instead of genetic code.

My major preposition in *carrier* was to respond to notions of the immune system as militarised zone where the body is represented as a territory of hierarchical attack and defence mechanisms against alien invaders. This good guys vs bad guys representation of immunity so well discussed by Emily Martin in *Flexible Bodies* is in complete opposition to theories like Niels Jerne's Nobel Prize winning but largely ignored *Network Theory of Immunity*, which proposes that to the Immune System there is no self or other. He sees immunity as a continuum where every variety of

"non self" has already been anticipated, and there is no need for attack and defence as we are already intimately connected with every virus on the planet.

Using Jerne's line of scientific sight, I present viral merging as a symbiotic love story, intimate and expansive an alternate narrative to "shoot em up"? and after all penetration of a virus into one's cellular core is probably about as intimate and committed a relationship as one can have. Cross species merging then, raises another set of issues around notions of individuality, sexuality and autonomy when in reality our bodies are conglomerate landscapes composed of swarms of bacteria, viruses and other organisms.

CTheory: Both your project *Carrier* as well as *Infectious Agent* bring together issues of gender and bioscience in different ways. Do you see these projects as comments on gender dynamics in genetics and biotech?

Melinda Rackham: Gender dynamics in science research really just tends to reflect the values of our more general society. Disease and infection have always been written as deviant and feminine: from Typhoid Mary to menstruating women whose "bad blood" could make penises turn black, shrivel up and fall off; to the removal of Victorian prostitutes (rather than their clients) from the streets as carriers of syphilis, which, of course, with the Infectious Diseases Act of 1870 was one of the first issues motivating modern western feminism.

My infectious agents are inherently feminine yet they are multiple gendered, containing every other possibility you read "sHe" the infectious agent from both works as you wish. They are also whores.. jumping promiscuously from body to body.., they are smart and seductive "sHe smiles at you sHe reaches out with sticky hands melt with me "? they invite an erotic embrace, a warm wet viral merging. And they are your best friends, your closest confidant, your perfect lover, spliced together forever at the cellular level.

But Viruses are cross-dressers they mimic others protoplasmic signatures to slip into places where the immune system would rather they not go with the resulting viral cross-species merging being sex in its rawest form the virus inserts its genetic material inside our cells, using our proteins to make an offspring, an almost perfect copy of itself.

This is an incredibly smart way to reproduce, to use a host/ess body whose gender is irrelevant. Viruses already know how to speak the language of the body, how to utilise it for their own purposes, while bio-medical science still struggles with its limited genetic alphabet of C A G T.

CTheory: We've seen recently a number of art-science collaborations what's your view of this? Do we need more cross-disciplinary work between the sciences and art? What might practices in new media art or net.art contribute to the sciences?

Melinda Rackham: Artists working with computer technology often act as carriers, bridgers, or translators between the specialisation/language groups of people who work are immersed in scientific R and D operating solely within their particular models for understanding. When those hermetically sealed worlds are opened up and translated to a more general public, as in the immune/military metaphor that I just spoke about, information becomes accepted as truth because it is an easily digested concept, and this builds on itself in an endless loop which, of course, feeds into the next set of investigations which takes those metaphors as starting principles.

Collaborating with scientists gives artists a window into another world and an opportunity to produce differing platforms for understanding a particular set of data, a viewing position that can be entertaining, challenging and informational. Maybe what artists do is open up a closed circuit; hack into another network; or slip viral samples into the wrong petri dish; enabling unthought of and irrational theoretical and/or biological symbiosis to occur.

Helen Chadwick summed up cross-species merging so eloquently that I think it can be equally applied to cross-disciplinary merging "The living integrates with other in an infinite continuity of matter, and welcomes difference not as damage but potential. ... Spliced together by data processing, these are not ruined catastrophic surfaces but territories of prolific encounter, the exchange of living informational systems at the shoreline of culture."

Melinda Rackham is a net.artist and writer based in Australia who has been working online since the mid-1990's. Her web works including *carrier* have been presented at many international festivals and conferences. She is currently completing her PhD in Virtual Media at the College of Fine Arts, UNSW, with a new work *empyreanAlpha* a realm of the senses online multi-user VRMLscape.

Eugene Thacker is an Assistant Professor in the department of Literature, Communication, and Culture at Georgia Tech. He writes on new media and biotechnology, and is a part of the art group Fakeshop.