



# The Patient Subject: Collaborative Biomedical Art and Curatorial Care

**Bec Dean**

PhD Candidate Art & Design, UNSW and Curator at Large, Performance Space  
Sydney, Australia

curator@performancespace.com.au, rebecca.dean@unsw.edu.au

## Abstract

How can curatorial practice bring into contemporary art programming/contexts and to visiting publics, the profound collaborations between artists and scientists in the creation of biomedical art? This paper outlines a curatorial proposal that investigates the practice of three artists working at intersections of the Museum, the Laboratory and the Clinic, they are: John A Douglas, Helen Pynor and Guy Ben-Ary.

This research addresses the atmosphere of openness between individuals and institutions across art and medicine, and the increasing porosity of institutions that allow artistic biomedical collaboration to take place. As a curatorial project, it questions the hidden nature of experiences surrounding disease, disability and bodily transformation and experimentation within our culture, and attempts to shift paradigms around corporeal representation, exhibition design and public knowledge.

Central to the research is theory on the body, including feminist theory; a review of literature engaging with the connections between art and medicine, particularly bio-art; and recent discourse around curating and collaborating. The program aims to interpret and transform artistic and scientific reciprocity in clinical, laboratory and museum contexts, where curatorial presence is essential and involved through all stages of collaborative research & development and presentation.

## Keywords

Biomedicine, Curation, Artist, Patient, Care, Clinic, Laboratory, Museum, Collaboration.

## Introduction

This short paper outlines curatorial research addressing new, collaborative artistic work being produced in the realm of biomedicine and the questions and possibilities the work raises for the presentation of biomedical art exhibitions and experiences to visiting publics.

Informing this research is the history and practice of Bio-Art over the last two decades, and observing the ways in which pioneering work of artists and collectives including Eduardo Kac and SymbioticA among many others have generated an atmosphere as well as contexts for exchange between art and science, encouraging collaboration. While these artists and groups, whose projects have variously speculated on scientific futures, experimented with genetic

material and evolutionary processes, or engaged provocatively and fantastically with many forms of life, the work of artists in this research use the possibility for biomedical collaboration to delve deeply into both scientific and experiential examples of human life, illness, death and life's prolongment. Rather than reaching outwards and forwards towards "the entire gamut of life processes and entities", and an expanded biological spectrum, they are tuned-in to comprehending and elucidating the complex present/presence of human experience. [1]

## Museum, Laboratory and Clinic

As a curator with over fifteen years professional practice, I have become increasingly involved in artistic projects related or proximate to research in science and medicine, across artforms, from photomedia and video to performance and forms of art as social engagement.

Through this research into interdisciplinary, collaborative, biomedical art, the capacity for an exhibition space and program that can encompass and integrate the differently culturally inscribed white-cube contexts of the museum, the clinic and the laboratory will be designed and tested. These are the places in which biomedical art is negotiated and fabricated by artists and their collaborators, but can these spaces be integrated conceptually, aesthetically and ethically to form another kind of space and exhibition experience? As a curator in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century I find myself and the cultural institutions I engage with as part of my practice, lagging somewhat conservatively behind the modes of enquiry and artistic outcomes of experimental, collaborative artists.

The artists engaged for this research and exhibition connect with the three spaces of the museum, the clinic and the laboratory in different ways and to different extents. While Guy Ben-Ary's practice is located predominantly in the laboratory, the use of his own cells has taken him into the clinic as patient in the harvesting of his own biological material. Helen Pynor's work roves between the clinic in her work with communities of former patients and their support groups and carers, to the laboratory for her study of cellular life, death and growth. While John A Douglas's practice has been undertaken predominantly in the context of the museum, he is a transplant recipient whose experiences are punctuated by visits to the clinic and his new work enters the space of the laboratory for the first time.

I want to discover through curating, if audiences can be brought inside the collaborative relationships that inform the production of biomedical artistic practice. Would an exhibition that integrated the social, political, scientific and historical situations that informed the making of the work enhance viewer experience and comprehension of the concepts and ideas in biomedical art?

### Interdisciplinary Intersections

Bio-Art is an area of experimental arts practice in which all of the case study artists have worked to varying degrees in support of, or as the main focus of, their work. Artist and academic Eduardo Kac has written a comprehensive history of this field, which includes his own practice and the work of his peers. In *Signs of Life* he articulates three “defining principles” for bio-art, which may be “wholly or singly adopted by bio-artists.” They are “(1) the coaching of bio-materials into specific inert shapes or behaviors; (2) the unusual or subversive use of biotech tools and processes; (3) the invention or transformation of living organisms...”[2] Kac takes the position of the objective scientist in his definition of bio-art with a focus on subversion, “randomness,” “transgenic” future life and radical possibilities of intervening in evolutionary processes. The artists with whom I am engaged however, seem to be involved in a critique of the possibilities of the heterogeneous, human present, and a deeper understanding of life, cognition, health and death as we think we know it.

One of the key questions in my research is whether the sciences and the humanities are moving closer together? Australian medical sociologist Deborah Lupton’s book *Medicine as Culture: Illness, Disease and the Body in Western Societies* (2003) outlines the present context in which the supposedly benign, neutral or truthful realm of medicine has been challenged – by feminists, sociologists and theorists – over several decades from the late 20th Century onwards.

Through reference to the work of Michel Foucault in particular, and his conception of the body as “the ultimate site of political and ideological control, surveillance and regulation,” as well as the work of key feminist theorists such as Donna Haraway in arguing the social construction of the body, Lupton charts the relationship of society to medicine – its ethical, philosophical, political and moral dimensions. This text provides my research with important grounding and a broader understanding of Medicine in a social context, including its presence in art, literature and mass media. [3]

Also in the realm of medicine as culture, Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) is a key text written from the perspective of author as patient. It engages with the spiritual, religious and artistic representations of disease throughout history and its affects in contemporary life. For my

research it provides background for the kinds of tropes and metaphors that the case study artists use in their new work – either consciously or through pervasive social doctrine. [4]

Contemporary artists have been working in the realm of body-based performance practice since the 1960s, through conceptualism and the second wave of feminism. For this research I am particularly engaged with the scholarship of Petra Kuppers, whose work has drawn attention to the practice of artists undertaking performance-based projects through their experience of illness and disability, and through the support of communities of care.

Her book *The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Art* (2007) is grounded in her research and personal work with artists, at a grassroots level, as an artist and activist living with disability. The book presents a phenomenological approach to performance art practice and an “affective way of knowing bodies”. Using the metaphor of the scar, Kuppers discusses the knitting together of biomedical and artistic concerns, of procedures and the experience of them. Kuppers is concerned with the ownership of knowledge and expression around these issues and so her analysis traverses the celebrated contemporary artists of recent history including Kiki Smith, Mona Hatoum and Orlan, and then work by lesser-known, “community artists” which can be found at railway stations or in shopping centres. [5]

Kuppers’ focus on both the experience of artists and the experience of audience/publics is of particular significance. I am investigating the possibilities of bringing together an encounter in space where the ethics, aesthetics and processes of art and medicine come together – the knitted “scar” space that she evokes.

Artists that have worked in this realm as patients, through embodied processes of pain-management, surgery and treatment include Bob Flanagan, Jo Spence, Hannah Wilke and Orlan. Wilke’s final work, with Donald Goddard was *Intra-Venus* (1992-93) a documentary portrait series of the artist while she battled lymphoma, depicting Wilke in the last months of her life. This work completed a life’s work making photographic portraiture as a means to address the “trauma of illness.” [6] The embodiment of pain in Bob Flanagan’s *The Pain Journal* is an important reference point to my work in terms of valuing the artist’s first-person perspective.[7]

The work of SymbioticA and particularly its directors Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr is crucial to my research and practice related to the ethical and moral questions involved in the presentation of live and ‘vital’ material in the space of the gallery. Their work has frequently been at the provocative forefront of conversations about museum ethics in relation to the presentation of living material. In Janet Marstine’s *Museum Ethics*, Ellen K. Levey uses the exhibition *Design*

and the *Elastic Mind* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1999 and Catts & Zurr's project *Victimless Leather* to illustrate the need for a different curatorial approach to the maintenance of live materiality in the gallery space. [8]

A key curatorial and research project engaged with the embodied space of the biomedical is *PITH – Hybrid Bodies* in Montreal, including the collaborative work of academics, artists and writers Margrit Shildrick, Ingrid Bachmann and Alexa Wright. The program explores specifically the heart transplant process, and the patient experience of living with a hybrid, transgenic body. The work is of particular note for my research as it engages in both biomedical enquiry as well as the engagement of transplant recipients as interview subjects. [9] Science-based foundations and institutions including The Wellcome Trust and the Science Museum, Dublin have a substantial history of engagement with contemporary art and artists in the context of their object-based, historical collections as well as producing exhibitions, events and experiences which transcend the arts and science divide. Pedro Reyes' project *Sanatorium* (2011), a transient 'clinic' presented by the Guggenheim Museum, New York is a key work presenting challenges to the uses of the museum for different kinds of audience engagement around ideas of health and wellness. [10]

The 'care' undertaken through the process of curation and collaboration within my three artistic case studies and final presentations will also examine a shift away from the care of objects, to the care of subjects, artists and audiences. My practice links conceptual rigour with logistics and real world concerns which I am considering through the lens of Donald Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner*, and the work of Lizzie Muller in interpreting his theories towards the realm of curatorial practice. [11] [12]

### Curatorial Care

Ben-Ary, Douglas and Pynor work in a materially 'alive' way in museum and gallery spaces through their performative presentations and their presentation of living material. Experiencing the laboratory contexts in which they create these works will enable an analysis of creative and institutional collaboration between art and science, as well as inform decision-making processes around exhibition design, care for the artists, their works and audience care as they encounter them.

John A Douglas is an artist who until recently has been living with renal failure. He began addressing his medical experiences directly in his art practice from 2011, by performing during the process and timeframe of dialysis treatment. Douglas's upcoming work *Circles of Fire*, "investigates the artist's life-changing experience and embodiment of his recent (April 2014) renal transplant, drawing upon the aesthetics of medical imaging, landscape as met-

aphor and the relationship of the performing body to medical treatment. Douglas aims to inform and engage audiences, awakening them to the medical and non-medical (emotional) experiences of a transplant recipient and the challenges that need to be met in order to prevent rejection." [13]

Douglas is working collaboratively with artist Helen Pynor, Derek Williamson from the School of Human Disease and has undertaken a preliminary artist residency at SymbioticA. Through his work I investigate relationships between artists-as-patients with scientific researchers, and the opening-out of art and science discourse into embodied territories.

Helen Pynor simultaneously addresses emotional and physiological questions around the liminal space between life and death in her work. Pynor's new work (as yet *Untitled*), engages on a tissue-based and microscopic level, the testing of the 'liveness' of animal flesh presented for consumption on supermarket shelves. Concurrently, the artist is interviewing both surgeons and former patients around experiences of lucidity and awareness during periods of actual, clinical death.

"The proposed art work will reflect on the contested boundary of death in deeply provocative but empathic ways, proposing instead a form of continuity between the states of living and dead. The project makes use of Pynor's unique position as an artist with scientific training which enables her to engage with science practice at depth and make a rare and insightful contribution to art-science interdisciplinary practice." [14]

Pynor has undertaken research for this project at the Max Planck Institute of Molecular Cell Biology in Dresden, Germany. Her process of interviewing patients and Doctors will take place in London, UK where she is currently based. Through her work I explore the integration of hard scientific data, alongside a community-based approach to information sharing and art-making. The project will expand ethical issues of using animal flesh in the context of research, to bringing this material into an exhibition, as well as the presentation of deeply personal life-after-death experiences to public audience.

Guy Ben-Ary is an artist long associated with the SymbioticA Centre of Excellence at the Department of Anatomy and Human Biology, University of Western Australia. Ben-Ary has been at the forefront of innovating around tissue culture and art for the past fifteen years. The method of his enquiry has generally involved the harvesting, growing and culturing of neurons from fish and rats and other small animals bred specifically for the laboratory. When advances were made in stem-cell research in 2007 - Induced Pluripotent Stem Cells (iPSc) - that enable human subjects to have living skin or any other cells engineered

into stem cells, Ben-Ary adopted this technology in his practice.

The artist has since undertaken a biopsy procedure where his skin cells were harvested. The tissue was grown and then induced to become stem cells for a project called *cellF* – a self-portrait as sonic, biofeedback loop. Ben-Ary is now working with neurological scientists to grow his stem cells into neurons that are then attached to an electronic circuit. Simultaneously he is working with a musician to create synthesiser feedback for the neurons, and a feedback loop so that the activity of the neurons is stimulated by its own synthesised sound. [15]

For *cellF*, Ben-Ary has reconnected with the scientist he engaged with for previous work, Dr Douglas Bakkum, who continues to work on the project for the potential value that it brings to his own research into neurological trauma. *cellF* brings into sharp focus for my research, ideas of

## References

1. Eduardo Kac, *Signs of Life: Bio Art and Beyond* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2007), 20.
2. Eduardo Kac, *Signs of Life: Bio Art and Beyond* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2007), 18.
3. Deborah Lupton, *Medicine as Culture: Illness Disease and The Body in Western Societies* (Sage Publications, London, 2003)
4. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (Allen Lane, London, 1979)
5. Petra Kuppens, *The scar of visibility: medical performances and contemporary art* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007)
6. Amelia Jones, “The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke” in *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (University of Minnesota Press, 187.
7. Bob Flanagan, *The Pain Journal* (Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2000)
8. Ellen K. Levy *Bioart and Nanoart in a Museum Context* in *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics* (Routledge, New York, 2011), 448.
9. PITH “Hybrid Bodies”, website, accessed January 12, 2014, [www.hybridbodiesproject.com/#!/pithteam/clmoy](http://www.hybridbodiesproject.com/#!/pithteam/clmoy)
10. Pedro Reyes, *Sanatorium Operations Manual* (Ridinghouse and Geneva University of Art and Design, 2013)
11. Donald Schön, *The reflective practitioner : how professionals think in action* (Aldershot, England : Arena, 1991)
12. Lizzie Muller “Learning from experience : a reflective curatorial practice” in *Interacting: Art, Research and the Creative Practitioner* (Oxfordshire, Libri, 2011)
13. John Douglas, artist statement 2014, part of a successful application to the Australia Council.
14. Helen Pynor, artist statement 2014, part of a successful application to the Australia Council.
15. Guy Ben-Ary, “cellF”, artist’s website, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://guybenary.com/work/cellf/>

‘care’ around object-subjects that are semi-living and curatorial ‘care’ for these works as well as the artist, from whose body they stem.

## The Patient Subject: Meeting the Public

The exhibition I will be curating for the Galleries UNSW titled *The Patient Subject* in late 2016, will be an exhibition in three parts: *New Enquiry, Documents & Engagement*. The exhibition and its three constituent parts will offer space for immersion in new artistic works by the case study artists, reflection on historical precedents in the field of art and medicine; and provide context for audience and specialist engagement, discourse and scientific experimentation. Through research and case study engagement I intend to create an exhibition environment that brings together participatory aspects of the clinic, experimental aspects of the laboratory and communication aspects of the museum.

## Author Biography

Bec Dean is a curator and writer who trained as a visual artist. She is currently a PhD candidate and casual tutor at UNSW Art & Design, University of New South Wales and Curator at large for Performance Space. She joined Performance Space as Associate Director in 2007 and became Co-Director with Jeff Khan in January 2012 until February 2014. Bec was previously curator at the Australian Centre for Photography (2005-2007) and Exhibition Manager at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (2002-2005). Bec’s curatorial interests revolve around interdisciplinary and participatory practices, performance, site-specificity, bio-medical art and art/science collaborations. Bec is the co-curator of the recent iteration of the interdisciplinary art laboratory *Time Place Space: Nomad* produced by Performance Space and ArtsHouse, Melbourne. Her current research on collaborative biomedical art will be presented as a large-scale exhibition and touring project, *The Patient Subject* in 2016. She has been published widely in Australia since 2000.