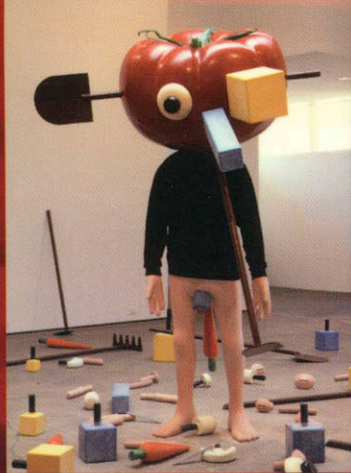


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THE MOLECULAR GAZE

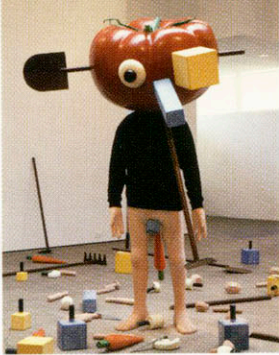
ART IN THE GENETIC AGE

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SUZANNE ANKER • DOROTHY NELKIN





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Contents

Preface, ix

Divining DNA, xi

Philip R. Reilly

Image Credits, xvii

Deciphering DNA: The Art and Science of a Supermolecule, 1

Reductionism: The Body as a “Code Script” of Information, 9

Mutation, Manipulation, and Monsters: The New Grotesque
in Art, 47

Blurring Boundaries: Chimeras and Transgenics, 81

Breeding Better Babies: A New Eugenics?, 113

Commodification: Genes for Sale, 153

Science as Culture: Through the Artist’s Lens, 185

List of Artists and Their Works, 197

Appendix, Group Art Exhibits That Focus on Genetics Concepts, 203

Index, 207

research and related developments may affect the value of life and our concepts of normality; and biotechnology applications will have unpredictable social implications. These are among the salient issues reflected in contemporary visual art.

Apocalyptic Visions of Genetic Engineering

In popular culture narratives—Frankenstein stories, science fiction films, and mutation myths—DNA is forbidden territory to be transgressed at an exceedingly high cost, while genetic manipulation is taboo. Genetically engineered creatures inhabit the fantasy world of science fiction comic books and horror films. A series called *DNAgents* features creatures that act human, but whose DNA has been altered just enough to make them more than human, thus turning them into perfect special agents. In another comic book series, *X-Men*, a campaign is organized to “terminate genetic deviants.” In yet another series, Dr. Xavier pleads with the public to “accept the mutants” for “we are all related, we are all family.”³⁰ Mutants also inhabit *The Fly* movies, both the original 1958 version and the 1986 Cronenberg remake. Whereas the first version evoked the fear of radiation, the remake emphasized the horrors of tampering with DNA.

Artists too use images of monsters to convey apocalyptic visions, and many of them are deliberately offensive—intended to shock. John Isaacs creates a monster by turning human flesh into a blob. His *The Matrix of Amnesia* (1997) (Fig. 12) depicts a corpulent human being as if he were an amoeboid organism. Acutely obese, and lacking a skeletal support structure strong enough to keep the body erect, the figure becomes a life-form reminiscent of primitive cellular development. Through excess, the monstrous and repulsive body regresses to an early evolutionary level, whereby protoplasmic creep becomes its form of locomotion. Isaac’s freak defies human boundaries and magnifies the fragility of our concept of the normal.

So too do Rona Pondick’s stainless steel sculptures, which transform the human body into a metallic skin. Shiny and flawless, emotionally distant, her works employ the synthetic process of assemblage. In *Untitled Animal* (1999–2001) (Fig. 13), a human figure lies insouciantly on the floor, apparently dissolving into body fragments. Like Kafka’s beetle (or John Isaac’s blob), the human form becomes a primordial monstrosity. Despite its shimmering metallic skin, the sculpture conversely conveys a dark sense of dissolution.³¹

In *Zygotic Acceleration, biogenetic, de-sublimated libidinal model (enlarged x 1000)* (1995) (Fig. 14), the Chapman brothers create an orgy of flesh by conjoining a dozen or more multiple bodies. The mannequins are positioned on a pedestal, recalling the 19th-century practice of putting “others” on display in museums and carnivals. Composed of connecting torsos with misplaced genitals, these transsexualized figures, writes a reviewer, “test the



13 Rona Pondick, *Untitled
Animal*, 1999–2001.