2.
Three Questions
A Holy Trinity or Three Blind Mice?[1]

Suzanne Anker and Assimina Kaniari

Three blind mice. Three blind mice.
See how they run. See how they run.
They all ran after the farmer's wife,
Who cut off their tails with a carving knife,
Did you ever see such a sight in your life,
As three blind mice?

Three Blind Mice, John W. Ivimey's fairy tale from 1909.[2]

However that is not the end of the story. The nursery fable continues: The mice befriend a chemist, who gives them optimistic advice, telling them it's *"Never too late to mend"*. Soon after their tails begin to resume to grow they regain their eyesight as well.

What this parable might tell us is that regeneration, a concept bantered about throughout history is now, in fact, among us. From prosthetic devices to genetic engineering culminating in CRISPR[3], a software program for editing genes, we are profoundly altering nature… Perhaps science and its technologies will offer solutions to once considered fatal circumstances. Face transplants, bio printed bladders and embryoscopes add revolutionary interventions infiltrating human reconstructions.

Assimina Kaniari: Dear Suzanne, my first question concerns your earlier work and your approaches to both imagery connected to the 'bio' theme and to the institution. In your discussion in your interview article 'Specimens as spectacle' which you co-authored with Sarah Franklin,[4] you drew attention to the practice of reframing in relation to your images which were photographed from a medical museum acquired without prior permission. Do you conceive of this process, which is implicit in the production of the final image to be exhibited,

as one closer to appropriation and the ready made or as one that allows us to discuss the boundaries and limitations, legal, ethical and social, of public space but also science labs and medical museums today? To what extent do you see your early work as one shaped by the notion of the institution and indeed perhaps as a critique of the institution–and knowledge production as well in relation to the social and ethical hierarchies that it contains and perhaps conceals?

Suzanne Anker: The series you are referring to is *Water Babies* (2004) (Figure 1). It was photographed at the Vrolik Museum[5] in Amsterdam. The Vrolik remains a working hospital and contains a collection assembled through the centuries. It is a private collection of specimens put together by Gerard Vrolik (1775-1859) and his son Willem (1801-1863). It is also very much in the Dutch anatomical tradition. Functioning as a domain of wonder, it still holds scientific information which can be reassessed through genetic analysis; since all teratological entities do not represent identical diseases.

I do not consider these images appropriationist nor ready-mades since they transfer three-dimensional objects into two-dimensional images. Such photographs are intended to show the variety of life forms even among the unborn and the undead. What I mean by this last remark is that these specimens were never born, never acknowledged by a birth certificate nor a death certificate. They are undead because they continue to support historical information with regard to disease and even tissue preservation techniques. They continue to raise questions about our own mortality and the impenetrable barrier between life and death - the impossibility of knowing what remains for us when we no longer have a metabolism. These pieces are *not* intended to be an institutional critique but rather one in which the public is invited to gaze upon the unknown, even the marvelous. During the extended past anyone who was anyone paid a visit to the museum to observe the specimens on hand. Not a freak show, (as in exhibition practices in amusement parks and state fairs in America) but an educational endeavor, the collection was an open source for the acquisition and production of knowledge and remains so today. Specimens offer clues to family history, the history of epidemics and even the social status of women.

The title of this piece *Water Babies*, also bears the same name, of a novel written by the 19th century Anglican theologian Charles

Kingsley,[6] a friend of Charles Darwin. Kingsley believed that the "moral lessons of nature" could be taught through his delightful children's story. In this parable, a young chimney sweep, Tom, appears filthy and uncouth, a clear indication of his lowly status in Victorian England. In an effort to escape his master and others running after him, he jumps into a stream where he falls into a deep sleep. Here he meets up with the fairies that turn him into a water baby. In this state he develops a set of gills. As he learns through reason and judgment to accomplish the tasks before him, he changes once again. Each time he performs his cerebral missions he ascends the phylogenetic order from fish to amphibian to mammal. In an effort to reconcile Darwin's theory of evolution with Christian theology, Kingsley sets up a dialogue between Tom and one of the Chief Fairies Mother Carey. Encountering her, Tom queries:

I hear you are very busy.

I am never more busy than I am now, she said without stirring a finger.

I heard ma'am, that you were always making new beasts out of old.

So people fancy. But I am not going to trouble myself to make things, my little dear.

I sit here and make them make themselves.

Invoking this parable further mystifies Creation into the area of wonder.

Scientists and researchers can now generate myriad forms of life through synthetic biology and by its extensions aesthetic applications.. We can intervene with life forms in real time through the employment of novel apparatuses and reconstructed bio materials. It thus becomes a glimpse of evolution operating in real time.

The body and its mortal remains are assessed very differently in Europe than in the United States. Fetuses in the United States are considered persons, while debates continue to ensue as to what rights such an entity may possess. Let us view the difference between Thomas Eakins' *The Gross Clinic* (1875) and Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632). In Gunther Von Hagens' televised a dissection in real time, (2002) which had Rembrandt's painting overhanging the dissection table, Von Hagens performed the first public autopsy in 170 years.[7] He played out his feat to a

sold-out audience of five hundred, and defying warnings that he could be arrested under the UK's AnatomyAct. Both paintings represent a surgical intervention, the former on a live patient, the later an anatomy lesson. Eakins's meticulously rendered realism was denied entry into Philadelphia's 1876 Centennial Exhibition; judged as being unfit for public viewing. The Vrolic museum is just one more example of how medical collections continue to impart knowledge and are fit for public viewing.

Assimina Kaniari: Thank you, Suzanne. My second question concerns also the institution and the place of art works and artistic practices metaphorically or literally tied to the 'bio' theme in new exhibition spaces comprising museums of contemporary art. In the new Tate Modern which I just had a chance to visit, for example, many of the exhibits' underline the active presence of the viewer as a participant; visitors being encouraged to sleep in purposely made open cages placed on the floor, play with wooden toys reminiscent of children's toys in Meschac Gaba's museum but also listen and look at displays of living birds such as the caged parrots in the Hélio Oiticica room. Would you conceive of such an emphasis on the living spectator or indeed the living spectacle as a trend in contemporary art and the museum related to bio art and if not in what way do you conceive of bio art practice as different from other practices in the contemporary art scene?

Suzanne Anker: The employment of animals in works of art can be very controversial. Examples include Joseph Beuys' *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) performed at Rene Block's gallery in NYC in which the artist cohabitated with a coyote. As early as 1973, pioneering video artist Frank Gillette included five terrariums of living creatures, all of which were being surveyed by multi-channel video systems. Cai Guo-Qiang's *Moving Ghost Town* (2014) employed African Sulcata tortoises with iPads mounted to their backs, which eventually caused a scandal in Aspen and the tortoises were removed.[8] Matthew Barney and especially Carsten Holler have also engaged with animals in their installations. These kind spectacles blur the lines between sentient beings and things. Are museums being converted into zoos? Is interaction really the only issue concerning spectacle or do these living accoutrements reinforce age-old problematics similar to the 19th century when

"savages" were put on display (Figure 2). The extent to which an animal has the ability to fulfill its natural functions becomes the essential question in specialized environments. If contextual change gives us a thrill or a jolt, think about the sentient creature. Where is the hospitality there? Pierre Huyghe's immaculate aquariums, however, provide otherworldliness in their self-contained , carefully nuanced environments.

Nicolas Bourriaud, whose Relational Aesthetics has gained attention in reframing interactivity. Owing allegiance to Allan Kaprow's Happenings and the Fluxus movement's temporality, spontaneity and social interaction are all part of Bourriaud's art experience. However, the decentering of the artist is very much akin to Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author*, 1967, in which the reader completes the meaning latent in the text. Relational aesthetics tries to add an interactive component to artworks but is the art museum any place for a rave? Anthony Haden Guest so aptly made a similar point about the art fair, labeling it the "new disco". In China, many citizens hang out at IKEA, having pictures of themselves taken sitting on the stylized furniture or even reclining on the beds as a way to entertain themselves while dreaming of one day becoming lucrative consumers. Is this performance art? Are plants less sentient than animals? What requirements are in store for them to occupy a museum?

Other such questions concern plants and their growth being housed in indoor farms as climate change and ecological demise force us to look at new ways of creating food. In 2009, I created a piece called *Astroculture*, which employed low carbon footprints using LED lights to grow vegetables at Exit Art Gallery in NYC. *Astroculture* is an artwork consisting of photographs, living plants, metal cubes and LED lights. It is a sculpture that is an indoor garden. Originally created for an exhibition entitled *Corpus Extremus (Life+)* as part of Exit Art's Curatorial Program in 2009, it has had several incarnations. It is similar to both a terrarium and a *Wunderkammer* but alternatively relates to NASA's ongoing Space program. With the rise of biotechnologies and "tinkering" of living systems can we imagine what vast resources are still available in outer space and deep sea habitats? How do plants respond to changes in gravity? What happens to seeds, for example, when they are grown in

space? NASA's Space Project Development Program is exploring these possibilities. The first growth facility installed in 2001 at the International Space Station was aptly named ADVANCED ASTROCULTURE9TM.

In *Astroculture (Shelf Life*, three plant chambers were constructed from off-the-shelf components (hence the reference to shelf-like and its double meaning). Each set consisted of galvanized metal cubes into which was fitted an LED panel. Placed inside the cubes were plastic dishes supporting peat pods implanted with vegetable seeds. Like Russian dolls, there is an internal stacking at play, which maintains optimum environmental conditions. Over a period of days the plants began to sprout, forming vines and leaves and finally string beans and peas. There were no insecticides employed, and the plants were watered on a regular basis. Surprisingly, although the plants appeared to be fuchsia-colored, they were, in fact, green. The glowing LEDs electrified the space while manifesting the possibility of growing herbs even in any New York City light deprived apartment. One can say these fuchsia radiances are in masquerade as they herald in the "new green", complete with low carbon footprints and deprived of poisonous chemical agents.

More recently, a larger version of this piece was installed in a cathedral in the great Gothic church St. John the Divine as part of a show entitled *The Value of Food* curated by Kirby Gookin and Robin Kahn. Composed of 31 cubes set high on a stainless steel table and backlit by the glow of stained glass windows, many viewers could not believe that these plants were real. Life became an aura, a fuschia colored glow (Figure 2).

Most plants cannot easily engage in locomotion as they are fixed to the ground. However, they do have quite remarkable sensitivities. They can recognize daughter plants as being connected to them. They have strong reactions to foes and even change their internal rhythms to compensate for dangerous predators. For some theorists, they are like animals, only much slower. Several remarkable films exist which explicate this issue.

Experimental plant ecologist, JC Cahill, a professor at the University of Alberta, talks about plants ability to actively respond to environmental changes. Although plants have no brain, or eyes or ears, they can still communicate.

In Michael Marder's *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*[10] the author talks about plant thinking as a non-cognitive and non-imagistic mode of thinking. In part, his text is a reaction to the mounting research in cultural studies centered on the "animal." He views 'plants as our non-human others'. Although they are sensile, they are not passive. He rests his assertion on the phenomenlogical concept of intentionality. For the philosopher, his aim is to "rethink concepts such as being-sensile and being-in-a-place as well as 'how above ground and underground environments appear to plants'. These are empirical experiences we, as humans, cannot fathom. He quotes Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, in this regard: 'It is utterly impossible for human reason […] to hope to understand the generation even of a blade of grass from mere mechanical causes'. Such awe and reference for living things is ultimately inspiring for me and acts as an energy source, driving me into further reflection.

Assimmina Kaniari: My last question concerns the ways in which art history and/or the work of particular art historians may be seen to have influenced your work, but also the relations, if any, between your visual work and historiography, the philosophy of history and of the history of art, in particular. On the one hand, one may discern a strong interest in the history of science, medicine and the history of medical collections and illustration in dialogue with art as evident in both your theoretical work and across many visual references in your art practices. But at the same time and quite consistently your visual work seems to engage with a more avant-garde aesthetic of art practice moving away from the production of objects into experimental practices concerned with an exploration of new realities and materialities afforded by the promise of the new that technoscience seems to hold for art and society. Do you conceive of your work in the visual arts as relevant to an exploration of, say for example, connections between the avant garde and bio art, in a way perhaps close to David Hockney's project of Secret Knowledge? If yes, what is the relevance of the avant-garde to contemporary bio art practice?

Suzanne Anker: Much has been written about the avant-garde, its history or its anticipated demise. I think we are in a novel era in which biology replaces physics as the subject defining

the present ethos. At the beginning of the 20th century, both art and science created dialogues which aesthetically conjoined, in parallel ways. Einstein's Theory of Relativity and Max Planck's Quantum Mechanics were equally positioned against the art object as a contextual entity operating within the context of language and systems theory.

Beginning with a 21century definition of bio art, three distinct yet sometimes overlapping sub-categories emerge. The first takes into consideration the allied practices necessary to transform matter on a molecular level: imagery garnered through methods such as MRIs, atomic force microscopy, electrophoresis, gene sequencing and PCR technologies. Images of chromosomes, body scans, genotypic and phenotypic variations, laboratory-fabricated animals enter the domain of image and object making. They can be found in painting, sculpture, photography, video, music and theatre. The second set of tools for bio art incorporates 3Dcomputer modeling software programs, artificial life, robotics, biodegradable scaffolding and an interest in emergent theories of life as subject matter for new media installations, rapid prototype sculpture (Figure 3) and algorithmic codes. And finally the inclusion of wet laboratory practices such as tissue engineering, the cloning of animal and plant cells, transgenic microorganisms and ecological investigations. Artists now employ living matter as their medium. Summoning awareness of the political, economic and social consequences of altering life is of particular importance to bio art. From relational aesthetics to performance art, from the institutional critique to new media installations, from photographic realities to manipulated ones, bio art is supported across myriad formats. Scientific paraphernalia, biological processes, body fluids and serums reinforce these evolving bodies of work. Dead or live animals, plants, and microorganisms often appear in art installations. It is common to see charts, sensors, computer chips and naked bodies as well. As a fusion of art and science, design and architecture, various parameters can be employed to evaluate bio art, based on a sliding scale of observations in support of the following end points: Can a work of bio art be judged on the degree of difficulty of the biological processes being employed?[11] What are its aesthetic parameters and how do these interface with the scientific one?

Bio art is actually a subgenre of what has a long history in its investigations of the ways in which art and nature intersect. At this juncture in time we are talking in molecular terms, in which chemical parts and gene and protein sequences replace pictorial representation. David Hockney's *Secret Knowledge* operates on the notion of instrumentation, particularly optical instrumentation. What we are talking about here are not lenses but biochemical reactions, synthetic sequencing and they ways in which parts and wholes can be dissected to create new entities. More like collage techniques in which cut and paste methods define results. This is not only about pictorial presence but also about fresh configurations of matter. Issues like the substitution of parts, artificial genes, and biochemical pathways enter the equation. Unlike the use of lenses (or even photography) as aides for making art in prior centuries, there now exists an open slate, *a tabula rasa.* If bio art is to advance its criticality more scholars, scientists, art historians and philosophers are required to engage and enrich in this ever-expanding discipline. Now, that's hospitality.

Figure 1: Suzanne Anker *Water Babies*, 2004. Digital prints. Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 2: Suzanne Anker *Astroculture (Eternal Return)*, 2015. Vegetable producing plants grown from seed using LED lights. Galvanized steel cubes, plastic, red and blue LED lights, plants, water, soil and no pesticides. 42 x 14 x 14 in (106.65 x 35.65 x 35.65 cm) each set. Installation view at *The Value of Food*, 2015 The Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, NYC. Image Courtesy of the artist.

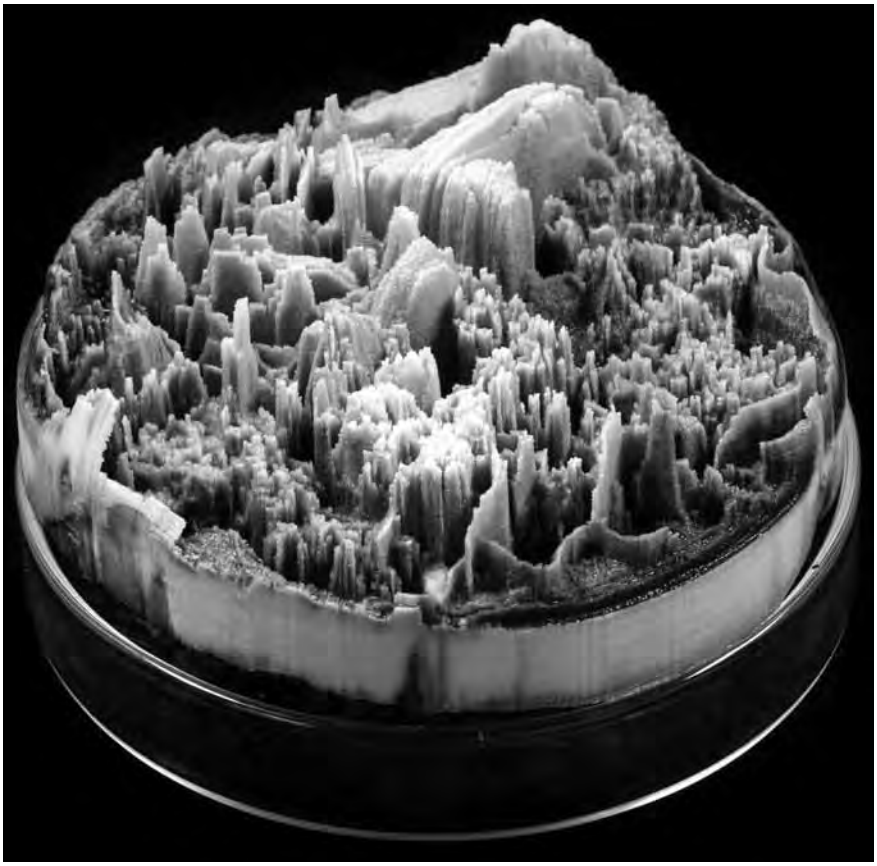

Figure 3. Suzanne Anker *Remote Sensing 32*, 2016. Rapid prototype sculpture in plaster and resin, colored ink, glass Petri dish 4” x 4” x 1.5”. Rapid prototype sculpture is made by a digital computer program which turns numbers into forms. Image Courtesy of the artist.

Notes

1. Assimina Kaniari would like to thank Suzanne Anker cordially for her contribution to the book in the format of a three questions' interview and also for providing an appropriate title and prologue.
2. J. W. Ivimey, *The Complete Version of Ye Three Blind Mice*, London, Frederick Warne &Co, 1909.
3. H. Ledford, 'CRISPR: gene editing is just the beginning', *Nature*, 07 March 2016. The article goes on to state that 'CRISPR is essentially a hacking tool which modifies the molecular machinery by editing; it is an advanced molecular scissor'. Also see D. Cyranoski and S. Reardon, 'Embryo editing sparks epic debate', *Nature*, 29 April 2015. 'Human embryos are at the centre of a debate over the ethics of gene editing. In a world first, Chinese scientists have reported that they have used powerful gene-editing techniques to modify human embryos. Their paper published in the Beijing-based journal *Protein & Cell* on 18 April, came as no surprise to the scientific community, but it has ignited a wide-ranging debate about what types of gene-editing research are ethical'.
4. S. Anker and S. Franklin, 'Specimens as Spectacles', *Social Text* 29, 2011: 103-125: 106.
5. S. Knepper, J., Antoon Moorman, L. se Rooy and H. van den Bogaaard, *Forces of Form,* Vossiuspers UvA. 2009. This text is a richly visual document of the history and collection of the museum. Ironically, in 2006, a Dutch Art Historian presented the Vrolik's curators with my work and there was no interest in an artists' intervention. While the photographs in *Forces of Form* present the specimens more clinically and with horror, my images express empathy and quietude. As theorist Catherine Walbys remarked, 'We are all just one gene sequence away from being monsters'. Furthermore there are many images of the Vrolik's collection on the internet. For a full array of my pictures in color, see www.suzanneanker.com.
6. C. Kingsley, *Water-Babies, A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby, London, Dent, 1957;* written serially for Macmillian 's Magazine. It was read aloud to children.
7. S. Chan, 'London's Cadaver A Reality Show Low?' CBS NEWS, November 20, 2002. http://www.cbsnews.com/news/londons-cadaver-a-reality-show-low/
8. S. Cascone, 'Protests Surround Cai Guo-Qiang's Tortoise Abuse at Aspen Art Museum: Why does the art world keep torturing animals' *Artnet News* August 6, 2014. Accessible also at https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/protests-surround-cai-guo-qiangs-tortoise-abuse-at-aspen-art-museum-73879

9. M. Marder, *What Plants Talk About*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013.
10. S. Anker, 'The beginnings and ends of Bio Art', *Artlink Magazine* 34: 3, 2014. Accessible also at https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4182/the-beginnings-and-ends-of-bio-art/