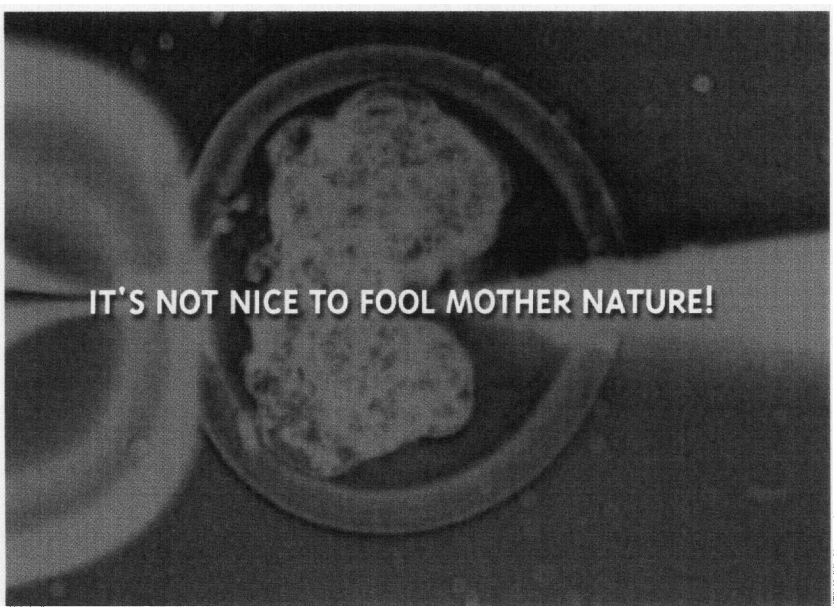
Critical Art Ensemble

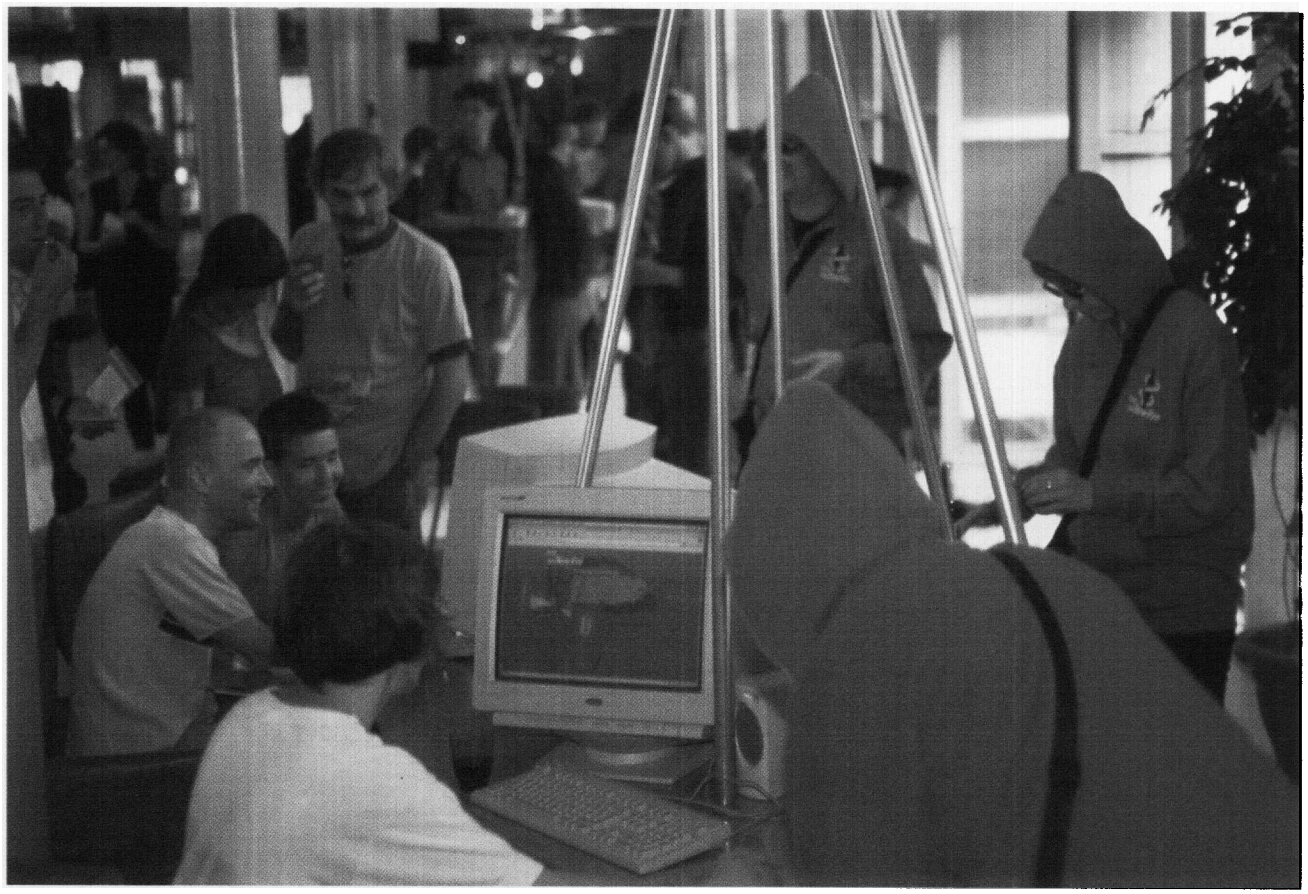
Body Invasion and Resistant Cultural Practice

Whenever new vision technologies make a cultural appearance, and access to them begins to trickle down to less endowed areas of specialization (like art production), there are those who will immediately seize the opportunity to get in on the ground floor of new aesthetic possibilities. It seems reasonable to assume that at this very moment, some artists are trying to negotiate turning in their Web cams for electron microscopes. And already, the "art world" has begun to see representations derived from molecular biology drifting out of the laboratories and into a variety of cultural spaces. With two decades of the vision-tech explosion behind us, what is ahead is relatively predictable: heroic molecular landscapes emphasizing the paradox of scale and the colorful beauty of the micro-world, and expressions of frankensteinian desire in the form of manufactured or intentionalized life-forms (glow-in-the-dark rats and proteins performing textual patterns), and other such fare. This time around, projects of technological and/or formal novelty will be all the more depressing. In the past, vision technology (such as video, for example) was generally limited to contributing to a further refinement of capital's vision apparatus of panoptic control. While this technology was quite effective in producing information, better controlling information flows (speed and volume), and superior vision capability, we could all rest assured that although the social environment was manufactured to effectively express the colonial texts of the reigning power regimes, the body still had some autonomy—there were still some organic processes out of the inscriptive reach of capital; there was a stopping point somewhere in what degree the body would have to bear the signs and burdens of capital. Not anymore. The greatest colonial initiative, perhaps ever, is underway—full-scale body invasion at the molecular level, making both immediate and cross-generational control possible. Unlike the first time capital attempted this initiative with the eugenics movement, this time it is ideologically, financially, and technically feasible. For this reason, CAE has found it impossible to treat this new technology as just another tool, nor to think that bio-art does not contribute to this second wave of body invasion if it does not foster resistant components.



Critical Art Ensemble. *Society for Reproductive Anachronisms*, 1998–99. Graphic from website. Courtesy of the artists.

To complicate matters further, the biotech revolution is a secret revolution, slowly infiltrating and subverting the structure of everyday life. Biotech's interventions into ordinary life occur stealthily with as little representation as possible. For example, new initiatives in pharmacology are kept secret—supposedly to protect corporate security—and the genetic engineering of organic



Critical Art Ensemble. *Cult of the New Eve*, 1999–2000. Performance. First manifestation at St. Clara Hospital, Rotterdam. This project represents a collaboration between Critical Art Ensemble, Faith Wilding, and Paul Vanouse. Courtesy of the artists.

commodities remains intentionally unlabeled in the United States.[1] Under these conditions, the production of images and performative structures dramatically changes. Resistant image makers have to begin at the fundamental level in order to represent the unseen elements of biotechnical developments in ways that are accessible and meaningful to nonspecialists. CAE believes that the best way to do this is through participatory projects in which information and actual scientific projects are brought to nonspecialists outside a context overwhelmed by the signs of scientific authority. For example, one only needs to skim over a sperm or egg donor screening test to see that something other than health issues is at stake. However, for this counter-perception to shine through, the review of this test must be done in a situation in which an authority (a doctor, for example) is not reassuring the reader that everything is okay.

In addition to designing and doing participatory performances that shed light on current political developments and the construction of representation associated with biotechnological expansion, CAE has attempted to undermine scientific authority for the purpose of creating room for diverse amateur discourse. The utopian rhetoric of the creators, manufacturers, and promoters of scientific invention is relatively hard to argue with, because of a popular perception that the public (nonspecialists in biology) cannot comprehend scientific knowledge at an advanced enough level to be able to validly comment on scientific claims and initiatives. The expertise needed to understand science to

1. CAE is not necessarily against organic commodity engineering in general. Such considerations must be made on a case-by-case basis with the analysis skewed far more toward ecological issues than toward health issues. The problem here is that the intentional withholding of accessible signage in everyday life situations by relevant industries suggests an attempt to eliminate public discussion and debate on the issues of biotech. For a more complete explanation of CAE's arguments see *Flesh Machine: Cyborgs, Designer Babies, and New Eugenic Consciousness* (New York: Autonomedia/Semiotext(e), 1998) and *Digital Resistance: Explorations in Tactical Media* (New York: Autonomedia/Semiotext(e), 2000).

allow a person to make an informed decision about courses of biotechnological deployment is modest! Amateurs should be a key part in this discussion (as in any with revolutionary social potential). Artists, activists, and students working in biotech are model amateurs who are making significant contributions to constructing a foundation for public discourse in the field of biotech, and should do what is necessary to replicate this discourse position and its alternative forms of perception and investigation among as many people as possible.

Finally, intervention in the utopian spectacle of biotech—what little there is—should begin as soon as possible. Here cultural producers are the experts. The current conditions that this group must engage seem to be as follows: specialists within the various areas that constitute the field of biotechnology tend to explain their discipline using the language of cybernetics. Unfortunately, this language is largely inscrutable to nonspecialists. To complicate the matter further, the standard utopian promises derived from the Enlightenment rhetoric of progress that are used to adjust perception of or sell technology to popular culture do not generate sympathy or excitement. Biotech's promises of a new body, convenience, democracy, and community (all the same promises used very effectively by information and communications technology) are tainted by trace cultural anxieties left behind by the prewar eugenics movement, and other, vaguer, big brother suspicions. The only other functional, broad-based popular utopian rhetoric that remains is Christian. Consequently, when biotech makes one of its few media appearances in order to sell itself as a stock option or raise research money, it offers the promises of immortality, miracle cures, edenesque abundance, and new universalism (i.e., DNA as a replacement for the soul). In contrast, CAE attempts to provide signs that contribute to the development of a critical (as opposed to utopian) public discourse on this subject matter and to disrupt or subvert the false spectacular distraction of progress and profit for all.

Critical Art Ensemble is a collective of five artists dedicated to the exploration of the intersections between art, technology, critical theory, and political activism.

N. Katherine Hayles

Visualizing the Posthuman

No longer a cloud on the distant horizon, the posthuman is rapidly becoming an everyday reality. Kevin Warwick communicates in binary code with computer devices in the environment via an implant in his arm; portions of a lamprey eel brain, transplanted into a mobile robot, direct the robot's motion; Cog, Rodney Brooks's humanoid robot, surveys the environment and plays catch with a human interlocutor. It is not a question of whether the posthuman will arrive but what forms it will take when it does. In this dizzying cascade of posthuman visitations, an area of contestation that remains vitally under-determined is embodiment. Should the body be seen as evolutionary baggage that we are about to toss out as we vault into the brave new world of the posthuman? Or does embodiment continue to be essential to human thought and being?

Complexly related to this issue is the role of the visual in posthuman cultural production, for vision both constructs an embodied world for us and