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Imagining a Genetic Seed Bank

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# Imagining a Genetic Seed Bank

*Susan Anker's exhibition at the Art | Sci Gallery showcases the transformation of matter to challenge viewers to think about environmental change.*

**BY STACIE CASSARINO**

IF “MAGICAL THINKING,” to use her words, is essential to Suzanne Anker’s practice of integrating science and visual art, it is also indispensable to the viewer entering her recent exhibition, Genetic Seed Bank, at the Art | Sci Gallery in the California Nanosystems Institute at UCLA.

Anker’s “silent animation” in large-scale digital photographs of marine life creates the

impression of being undersea, eye-level with aquatic nature as it coexists with industrial matter—vibrantly colorful bits of coral grow on concrete discs placed on a lattice of PVC, a plumbing plastic. One thinks of pictures of marine organisms regenerating in the ruins of shipwrecks, only this is a controlled environment, composed by an artist. How can this multihued spectacle of animate forms persevere from such

inorganic material? And yet the scenes do not deceive—the coral is flourishing. Anker’s exhibit is a testimony to the power of nature to triumph. But more than that, it demands to know: What is the place of human beings in regard to other living beings and the environment? What are the new ethics and epistemologies surrounding issues of artistically conceived partial life, particularly in this genetic age? What are the

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***Astroculture (Shelf Life)* by Suzanne Anker.  
(Detail) 2010, inkjet print, 24x36 in**

values embedded in works of art? How does art preserve life?

Part bio lab, part art exhibit, “Genetic Seed Bank” showcases the transformation of matter to get us to reflect upon the structural and environmental changes occurring all around us, revealing the ways and means that life is being altered in the twenty-first century. One might situate Anker’s work in the realm of Bioart, a relatively new genre that sprang up in response to the emergent field of genetics, which entered into popular culture in the late 1980s. Bioart refers to the overlapping domains of the biological sciences and plastic arts, much like Transgenic Art, which involves the use of genetic engineering to invent new life. Bioartists work with live matter, often experiment with biotechnology, and produce artworks in laboratories, studios, and galleries, with the aim of querying the social, ethical, and aesthetic values rooted in art. Anker, a visual artist and theorist working with traditional and experimental media at the intersection of art and the biological sciences, founded the first bio lab in a fine arts department, the Nature and Technology BioArt Lab at the School of Visual Arts in NYC, where she creates ecosystems in terrariums composed of living and industrial materials.

The intentionally dimly lit gallery containing Anker’s work simulates the laboratory experi-

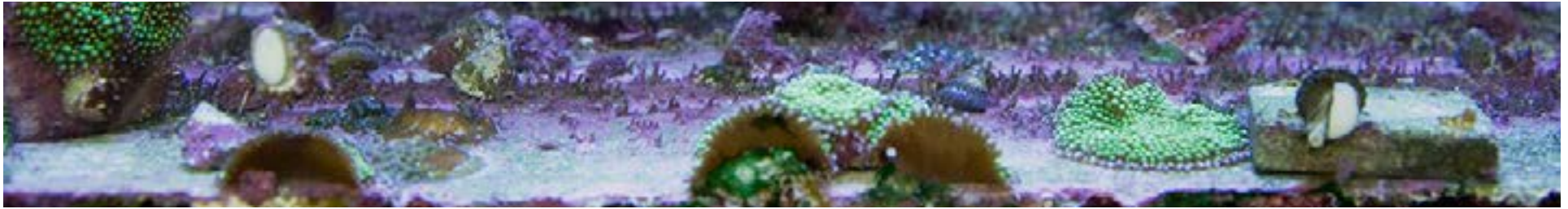
ence, producing a disorienting encounter with art-as-specimen. By repurposing signs from the natural world into the aesthetic realm, literally moving images from the lab to the gallery, Anker creates a new social field of images to interrogate questions of human agency, stewardship, knowledge, and ethics. With the goal of integrating visual thinking into the living, she underscores the artist’s as well as the viewer’s personal responsibility for all aspects of the living world.

Anker’s installation includes a series of five pictures, inkjet prints on watercolor paper, most at 24 x 36 in, the largest of these projected onto the wall with a slight impression of movement replicating an oceanic current. The images portray MOTE Laboratory, a coral research and recovery program in the Florida Keys where scientists are developing methods to reduce the increasing destruction of coral reefs, which house the matrices of entire ecological systems from corals and plants to fish and birds. The concept for Anker’s coral seed bank derives from the work of these scientists, whose system of classification for corals is based on genetic sequencing. She uses art as an interventionist yet analogous means with which to envisage the genetic seed bank as a form of “repair” and “reformation.” Her genetic sequences of coral reefs are a recovery attempt

that brings to the forefront the artistic, social, and scientific implications of using bio/med technologies for artistic purposes.

Most importantly, Anker’s speculative and practice-based research is approached with Oron Catts’s concept of an “aesthetics of care.” Her work asks, What is the responsibility of the artist in the preservation of living forms, and how does such care, implemented in the practice of art, contribute to a broader, global initiative to revitalize and diversify the planet? In this particular manifestation, coral adapts to and ultimately thrives within the foreign environment in which it is aesthetically circumscribed, and in this way its restoration is achieved. However, Anker also uses art to see and show the ways in which nature rebels. She highlights the variety and complexity of coral: not just a plant, it is a “collective aggregate of individual animals operating as a community,” with symbiotic and parasitic relationships. Her dioramas enfold nature and culture (technology), considering their interdependencies and rendering an evocative “ambiguity of conjunctions.” It is within these points of contact —between coral/PVC, nature/human, artist/spectator—that transformation is possible.

As part of this exhibition, Anker lays out an interactive mini-lab of petri dishes filled with fragments of things from the sea, such as coral,



urchin, algae, and crab shell. The parts, though displaced from their natural habitats and formations, are reenvisioned together as a whole ecosystem. One is reminded of the Renaissance-era encyclopedic collections of objects known as “cabinets of curiosities,” which depicted theatrical microcosms of the natural world. But in Anker’s project, life forms are transformed into art forms, which then materialize into new life forms, emphasizing not only the necessity for reparation but also the vitality of art itself to sustain human life, to influence the life-cycle. Anker shows us that life begets art begets life. Perhaps this is where her sense of the “magical” is required. Visitors are encouraged to move beyond the visual, to touch the specimens, to examine their multi-angular textural elements, an interaction

effectively resulting in a new and perhaps more impacting form of communication between humans and art objects or, more precisely, between humans and other living beings. While art is typically kept at a distance from the observer, at Anker’s opening visitors were on their knees in the dark, huddled around the sampling of nature’s wonders.

By decontextualizing familiar objects in new ecological networks within the art space, Anker radically finds a way to evoke the mysterious as well as the pleasurable at the junction of science and art. Her specimens are alluring curiosities. Her images are pretty, mesmerizing, a salve. Yet they embody and incite action. She proposed in her lecture that we consider the digital image as a circumnavigatory “sign in action.” Indeed, her work asks us to think through the

“compelling narratives embedded in pictorial icons” that constitute our own mutating cultural imaginary, itself a database. The semiotic function of aesthetic images is a central tension in her work. By generating new life, art yields new information. Art, Anker reminds us, is a vital form of knowledge production. Noting the resemblance of coral forms to the human brain, Anker metaphorically reflects upon their convolutions. But beyond this, art as we experience it in this exhibit is also a real means of visual pleasure, and, in the case of the specimens, tangible delight: a potential restoration to the human spirit during disquieting times of white noise. The gallery invites a certain presence from us, temporary submersion in an optimistic narrative in which we may become agents of change to counteract our increasingly



polarized cultural moment. At a time when the realms of nature and technology are only growing further apart, Anker's art exposes their symbiotic relationship. Nature and technology may be unlikely allies, but the scene in which they cohabitate is one of equilibrium, albeit magical. And we have a role in their proliferation.

When we address the task of art to mediate the differences between nature and technology, we are eventually led to wonder how we might understand the aesthetic act of repair and restoration as gendered. While Anker's project does not overtly confront gender, it is possible to consider the ramifications of such an aesthetic endeavor as it adheres to and defies conventional ideas of gendered identity. One could even argue that Anker's work is feminist in approach—she uses the laboratory-gallery as a twenty-first-century space for reproduction, a space in which she invests in the emotional labor of cultivating new life. By engaging activities that have been traditionally associated with an essentialized theory of femininity in the lab, a historically male domain—the reproduction and nurturing of new life forms, the modeling of new communication, the cultivation of symbiotic relationships, the valuing of affect—Anker disrupts reductive notions of gender, procreation, conception, and art. The “aesthet-

ics of care” which she advocates is thus applicable to an expanding idea of what it means to be a citizen of the world. Her art enacts a mode of resistance by intervening in discourses concerning the ecology of seeds, bringing awareness to the ways in which the sciences inevitably alter socio-cultural values in society, while also revealing how the arts, conversely, shape the bioethical imagination.

“Genetic Seed Bank” anticipates a symposium, “The Politics of Seeds,” organized by the Center for the Study of Women, which will take place May 16 and 17, 2013. The symposium is part of “Life Un(Ltd),” a multiyear research project initiated by CSW Interim Director Rachel Lee that addresses the question of what impact recent developments in the biosciences and biotechnology have had on feminist studies, particularly regarding the rich connections between food, ecology, propagation, and metabolism.

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*Author's note:* Citations are from Suzanne Anker's lecture on November 13, 2013, at the Broad Art Center and are excerpted from her “installation notes” and website (<http://www.suzanneanker.com/>). Images are courtesy of the artist.

## **THE POLITICS OF SEEDS**

**A symposium, May 16 to 17**

***How have gender, ethnicity, and race shaped contemporary cultural and political movements related to seeds? How has global climate in relation to economic and cultural crises affected food systems and place-based heirloom seeds? What sociological, ethnographic, and humanistic methodological tools have we integrated into the study of food culture and food politics and to what ends? To what extent has research by corporations and engineers redefined the ecology of seeds and how have political and artistic forms of resistance intervened?***

**Join us as we explore some of these questions in “The Politics of Seeds,” a symposium on May 16 to 17, 2013, co-organized by Allison Carruth, a professor in the Department of English at UCLA and CSW Interim Director Rachel Lee.**