

aping blinking seeing

Megan Erasmus

aping blinking seeing

Ethics in Biotechnology and Transgenic Art

Megan Erasmus

Contents

Introduction	01
Body of Work	05
Methodology	09
Portfolio	17
blinking series	18
aping seeing series	38
Installation Details	48
Epilogue	59
Bibliography	61
List of Illustrations	64
Acknowledgements	66
About the Artist	67
Contact Details	68

"We humans like to think that we have capacities that make us not only distinct from all other creatures on the planet, but also superior to them. We eat them, kill them for sport, drink their milk, wear their skins, ride on their backs, ridicule them, house them in zoos, and breed them to our own specifications"

Michael Corballis in *The Recursive Mind:
The Origins of Human Language, Thought and Civilization*

Introduction

The *aping blinking seeing* exhibition is inspired by the resistance against the often unethical practices on living beings through the application of transgenic art and biotechnology. Transgenic art is defined by Eduardo Kac, a practicing transgenic artist, as a process that employs the following approaches:

(1) the coaching of biomaterials into specific inert shapes or behaviours; (2) the unusual or subversive use of biotech tools and processes; (3) the invention or transformation of living organisms with or without social or environmental integration (Kac 2007b:18).

Research on the application of these methods steered me to question the ethical stance of the artist/scientist when life is manipulated for the purpose of art. The art of Eduardo Kac was researched to explore the intricate relationship between artist, its living creations and the public's participation in ethical debates on transgenic art practices. The *GFP Bunny* (2000) is one of the main artworks researched. The artwork was a living rabbit which glowed green with ultra violet lighting. Her whimsical trait came from the insertion of a green fluorescent protein found in a Pacific jellyfish into an albino rabbit's fertilised egg. Placing a living green glowing rabbit in the realm of art, generated and still generates a lot of reaction globally today. The artwork not only represented ethical debates on the well-being of animals used for research purposes, but in being a living artwork, she became the actual debate of discussion. The intended and unintended phases of the artwork ultimately resulted in the prevention of the rabbit living a natural life.

Because of her unnatural characteristic, she would not be able to survive in the wild. The unclarity of authorship with the laboratory where she was created also contributed to her staying in captivity.

The events around this artwork made me question the responsibility of the artist towards that which he or she has created and that by overlapping the fields of art and science, the rules are not always clear cut. Ultimately, to create with life as a medium for art implies death or termination of the artwork, which in itself becomes problematic. "At the end of every installation we are faced with the ultimate challenge of an artist – we have to literally kill our creations" (Catts & Zurr 2003:12). In Kac's case, the rabbit was announced dead by the laboratory which refused to release her to Kac where she would have lived with him and his family. Although the artist had the best intentions, the lack of proper procedure and legislation for transgenic art subjects caused an unpredictable outcome, a voiceless creature leading an unnatural life, ultimately until her death.

Another artwork by Kac which made an impact on my research is entitled *Genesis* (1999). The artwork's premise revolves around the use of a specific sentence from the biblical book of Genesis: "Let man have domain over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28). The interpretation of humankind's ability to manipulate and use nature to his own advantage is questioned. Furthermore, its interactive element presents an opportunity for the public to participate in biotechnological practices.

By manipulating elements of the artwork, the biblical sentence is ultimately changed through public participation. This interference becomes a metaphor for the questionable authority to create life. Public participation also implies public awareness.

There is an appreciation for the innovative and creative outputs that contribute to these important discussions. However, through the interrogation of ethical issues in transgenic art, I made a conscious decision to use digital art making instead of transgenic art practices for this particular exhibition, because of a discomfort with the skeletal ethical regulations in the transgenic art field, especially in South Africa. I am purposefully distancing myself from transgenic art practices; in a way surrendering my dominion over nature through the decision to not manipulate animals' genes for my own artistic intention.

The research reawakened consciousness for the individuality of all living beings and the unfairness of suffering introduced to these beings in manipulated circumstances in laboratories or forced social structures. More specifically, my body of work has been shaped by research of the mental state of primates used in scientific experiments and the proven fact that they suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. The *Pan troglodyte*, common name chimpanzee, was the chosen species used in the images. In particular, the life story of Oliver, a chimpanzee first mistaken for the missing link, and his subsequent suffering in lab experimentation, was an inspiration for the body of work.

Oliver was known as the “Humanzee”, because of his unusual human-like face and his tendency to walk upright. For many years, Oliver was the subject of intense and cruel experimentation, and like Kac’s *GFP Bunny*, unable to live a natural life. Only when it was finally established that Oliver was not a human hybrid, he was transferred to a sanctuary and spent his last years with a gentle female companion known as Raisin.

All his years as a test subject left him unable to interact with other chimpanzees, also blind and arthritic. Oliver’s human-inflicted condition towards the end of his life ironically contributes to the title of the exhibition, aping blinking seeing. Do we as a society blindly support scientific and artistic practices where animals are experimented on to a point where they turn blind?

Body of work

The exhibition *aping blinking seeing* refers to specious - merely apparent - imitations of possibilities in the form of portraits and stillframe animations in dialogue. These portraits "are not bodies per se, because they do not have dimensions or corporeal natures distinct from those of the media in which they are situated..." (Tiffany 2000). The nine fragmented portraits were created by a process of image over image layering of material of chimpanzees used in research experiments. They are copies without originals, a metaphor for the outcome of 'obscurity' for these creatures. The portraits comment on an uncontrolled artistic/scientific society that increasingly seem to indulge in beyond.

The six stillframe animations portray three chimpanzees and three self-portraits of the artist in dialogue. The artist attempts to mimic the eye movement of the simulated animals or vice versa. The common denominator is the pallid eyes lacking intensity, colour, luminosity, radiance and vitality. The artist portrayed in the animations becomes the mediator who portrays the suffering of these creations to the viewer, but more importantly, the possibility that this scenario might become a reality for humans in advanced technological experimentation in future. The artist links the emotion of the human and the experimental animal to emphasize the awareness of- and respect that we should have for all living beings.

"We hardly know them, and yet within the vastness of the universe, they and the rest of earth's biota are our only known companions. Without them, our loneliness would stretch to infinity" (deBuys 2015).

Capturing loneliness and desolation is an essential part of the body of work. Faint simulacra and ghost-like unfinished projects of lab experiments are in dialogue with each other as well as the viewer.

The short story *The Circular Ruins* by Jorge Luis Borges about a dreamed up simulacrum was consulted as a source of inspiration. My creations were dreamed up in the same way. The narrator in the story is a mortal human being, who for me symbolizes the transgenic artist, who aspires to create other beings. In the story, an old wizard, near the end of his life, finds himself in an old circular ruin which once was a temple. His sole purpose at this stage of his life is to dream up a being "in minute entirety and impose him on reality" (Borges 1964). The story works with the concept of liminality, which insinuates meaningful borders between related concepts. The dreamed up being of the wizard portrays the liminality between sleep and wakefulness, dreams and reality. For me this concept resonates only with the practice of transgenic art, but also with the creation of the stillframe animations in this body of work, which portray created beings who try to place themselves as real or fictitious. They are constantly trying to open their eyes and awaken.

"In the dream of the man that dreamed, the dreamed one awoke" (Borges 1964). This sentence from Borges' story is a metaphor for the artist who wants the artworks to awake, as the transgenic artist would want his living artworks to come to life. For the wizard in the story, as well as for the artist, the idea that one's creation is only a simulacrum, torments. "He feared lest his son should meditate on this abnormal privilege and by some means find out he was a

mere simulacrum. Not to be a man, to be projection of another man's dreams...what an incomparable humiliation, what madness!" (Borges 1964). This humiliation and madness are all encompassed in this body of work through the portrayal of emotions that animals in laboratories possibly experience.

The process that the wizard undertook to dream up his being is a metaphor for my creative process: "Every night he perceived it more clearly...He did not touch it; he only permitted himself to witness it, to observe it and occasionally to rectify it with a glance. He perceived it and lived it from all angles and distances" (Borges 1964). I want the viewer to experience the same occurrence. The creatures in the animations, as the simulacrum in Borge's story, "did not sit up or talk, ...was unable to open his eyes" (Borges 1964).

Another source that inspired this body of work was Peter Beagle's tale called *The Last Unicorn* (1991). The story follows the world's last unicorn through her adventures to find her family or others of her kind. This immediately reflects on the one-of-a-kind creature in manipulated life forms. In Beagle's story the unicorn is captured by a witch and a wizard. The witch captures magical creatures for her Midnight carnival, a platform where viewers can come and indulge in the presentation of mythical creatures and beasts.

A similarity between Beagle's Midnight carnival and Eduardo Kac's transgenic artworks presented itself. Public participation formed an integral part in the progression of

the transgenic artworks of Kac, and in the case of the Midnight carnival behind the capturing and showcasing the mythical creatures.

As the story progresses we learn that the Midnight carnival creatures are merely normal animals and that the enchanted unnatural elements which make them seem mythical, is just a trick. This concept of presenting creatures that are not associated with the 'natural' or 'normal' on a public platform reflects on Kac's notion to use transgenic artworks such as *GFP Bunny* as a platform to open public discussions on ethical practices of biotechnology. My work, however, aims to show that these 'mythical' creatures, no matter how interesting, attractive or useful they seem, still feel suffering in a very real way.

The animated version of *The Last Unicorn* shows how the unicorn, as a true being, is able to reveal the untruths created by the witch, when she strips the creatures of everything that is unnatural to their true beings (2011). In the same way, the series of portraits exhibited are stripped of all unnecessary information in an attempt to expose the vulnerability of monstrosities created in labs, whether for the sake of art or science.

Methodology

The first part of the exhibition entitled *blinking* series entails nine digital prints. Each portrait consists of approximately 50 layered images of chimpanzees used in laboratories for research experiments. Small illuminated and dissolved pieces of these chimpanzees were carefully repurposed to construct an entire new identity, a new species through digital manipulation. Transgenic art methods are applied conceptually in a non-bioart manner. The method is symbolic of how a scientist or transgenic artist would identify, select and repurpose a genetic trait or characteristic. Careful selection, manipulation, pairing and subtraction occurred to create a new identity for the sake of art. Each portrait came into existence as the process continued; eventually developing its own identity, expressing individual emotion.

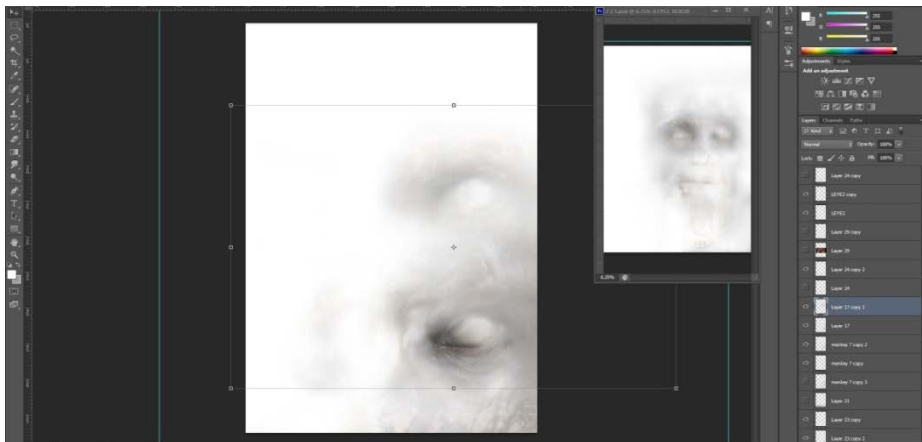
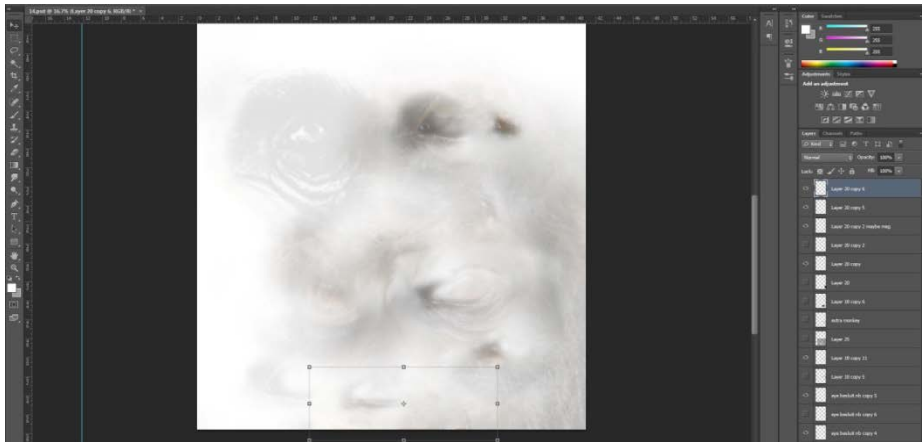
Through six stillframe animations, these identities were once again paired and manipulated to represent the birth, survival, suffering or death of a created life form. Through digital technology, it is possible to mimic, bringing an idea to life, as it would literally be applied in transgenic art. The idea is to evoke emotion and reawaken a social responsibility for the living without using living matter, and thus comment on using living matter as a medium for social commentary in art.

In order to maintain the integrity and the skeletal nature of the subject-matters used, no filters, additional colours, shading or any artificial elements were applied. Instead, I chose to use parts and elements of photographic material, as is, only in transparent form and layered over one another. Images of different parts of the chimpanzees were

used with new definition, for example, the hair on the shoulder of one chimpanzee would form part of the eyelid of the simulacra, or the iris of one chimpanzee would form part of the inner brow of another. All unnecessary information is stripped from the portraits and they are left with minimal combined elements to mostly represent the eyes of the chimpanzees. The colours of the portraits are a result of the transparent layering; interestingly they reflect the colours of bruising.

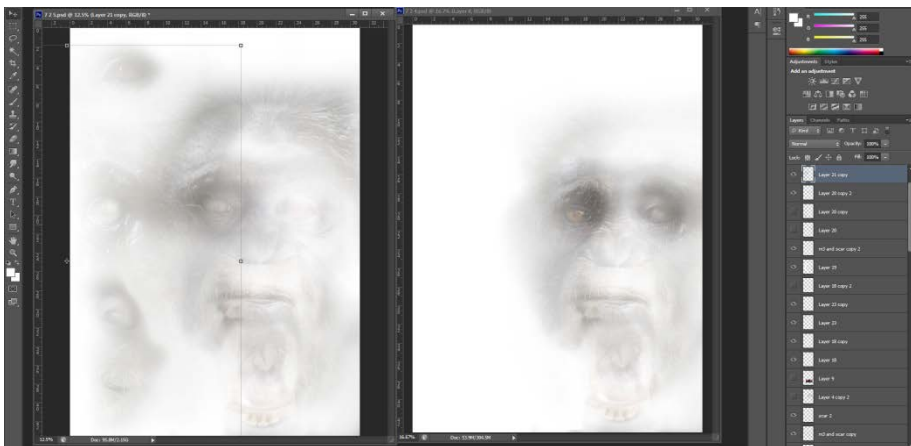
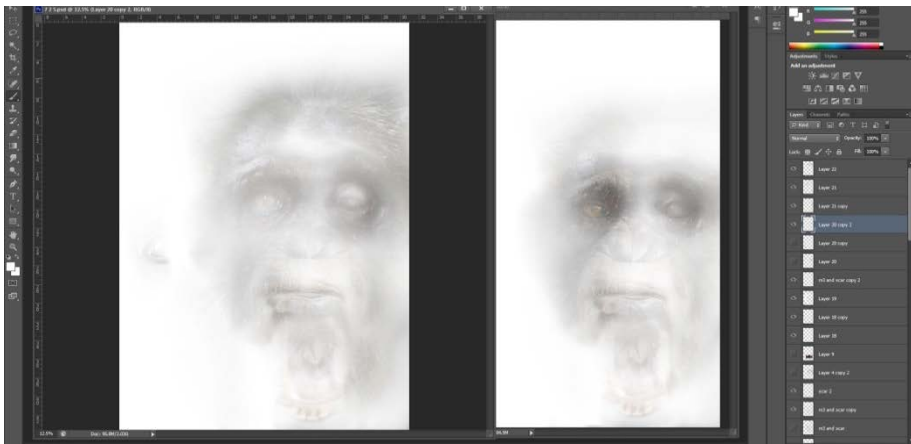


Still from the *aping seeing* series
The creation process
2015



Above: Stills from the *blinking* series
The layering process
2015

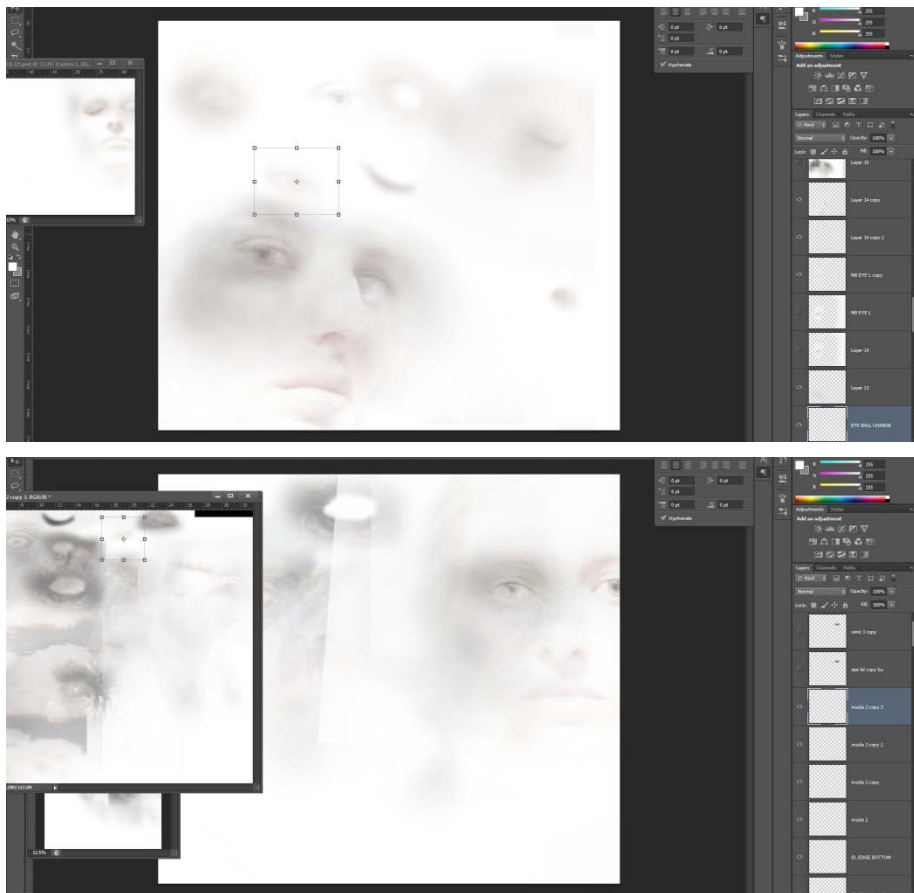
Right: Stills from the *blinking* series
The subtraction process
2015



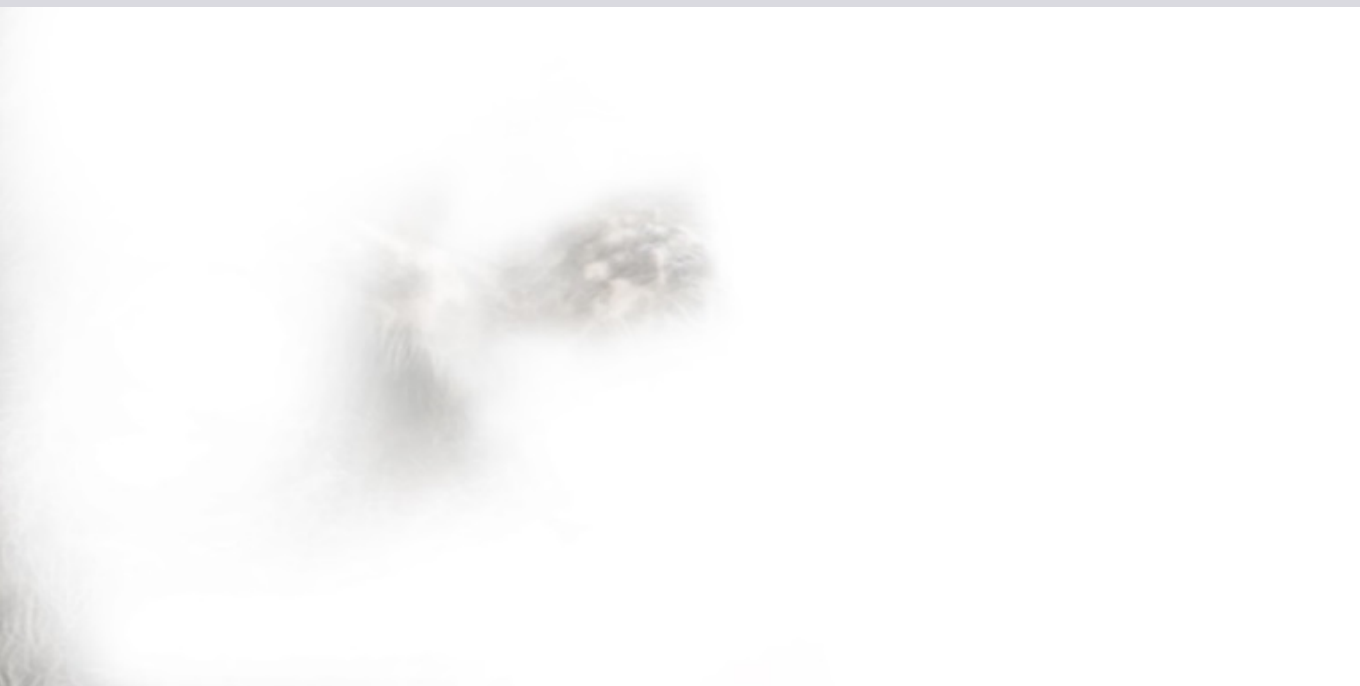
The second part of the exhibition is entitled *aping seeing* stillframe animation series. The first three animations depict identities of chimpanzees used in scientific research experiments. These created chimpanzees were animated to appear as if they are awakening to life. Each animation is compiled of 10 images per second, resulting in approximately 500 images per animation. Each layer used for the animation was carefully selected and slightly manipulated to create a minimal movement, mostly of the eyes. The metaphor behind the integration of medium and subject matter is as if genetic engineering is applied. The artist comes in to play, as the wizard in the mentioned Borges tale, breathing life into a new creature over a period of time. Every part of the chimpanzee's face is dreamed up, considered, reworked and placed carefully in order for the chimpanzee to wake up from an ordeal. I try to show my sympathy towards my own creations, almost becoming responsible for them, trying to establish a platform for the voiceless chimps. By mimicking the chimpanzees through the self-portrait animations, the metaphor of 'monkey see, monkey do' is in play.

Once again, I try to open the debate of whether the public is aware of the realities of biotechnology and transgenic art, so that these living creatures will not remain voiceless. Secondly, I attempt to portray what would happen if the notion of biotechnology is applied to humans in research experiments. If physical and psychological pain is inflicted on a sentient being over a period of time, surely that being deteriorates to a point where the body becomes somewhat mechanical, an automate-like apparatus.

The sound included for the animations is abstract in nature, reflecting sounds of metal being bent, tools being sharpened and chains being rattled. These sounds were chosen to contribute to the loneliness and uneasiness associated with being kept in a cage. The sound also includes obscure piano notes to mimic an old carnival tune, to comment metaphorically that we play with the lives and genes of animals for our own advantages and entertainment.



Stills from the *aping seeing* series
The creation process
2015



Stills from the *blinking* series
The selection process
2015



Portfolio



blinking series

Untitled

Edition 1/12

Digital manipulation printed on Soft White Illovo paper
2015



Untitled

Edition 1/12

Digital manipulation printed on Soft White Illovo paper
2015

Untitled

Edition 1/12

Digital manipulation printed on Soft White Illovo paper
2015



Untitled

Edition 1/12

Digital manipulation printed on Soft White Illovo paper
2015



Untitled

Edition 1/12

Digital manipulation printed on Soft White Illovo paper
2015



Untitled

Edition 1/12

Digital manipulation printed on Soft White Illovo paper
2015



Untitled

Edition 1/12

Digital manipulation printed on Soft White Illovo paper
2015



Untitled

Edition 1/12

Digital manipulation printed on Soft White Illovo paper
2015



Untitled

Edition 1/12

Digital manipulation printed on Soft White Illovo paper
2015



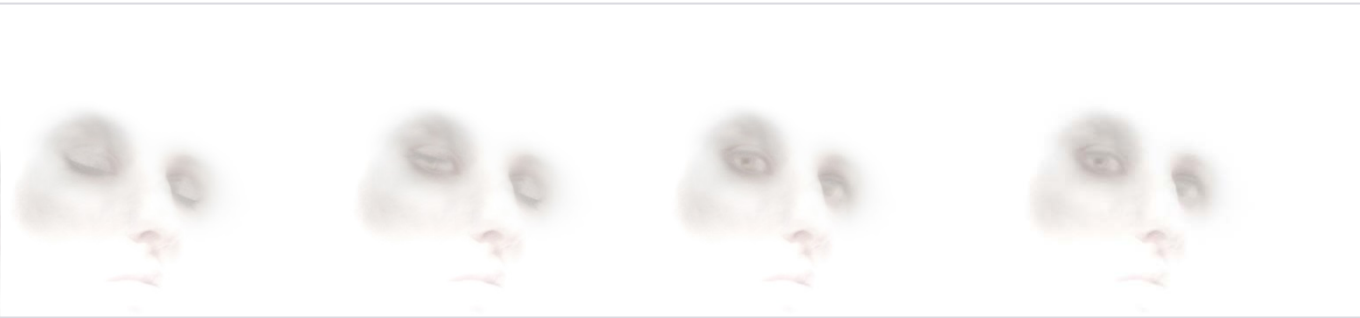
aping seeing animation series





Stills from the *aping seeing* animation series
seeing 1
Stillframe animation
10 frames per second
2015





Stills from the *aping seeing* animation series
aping 1
Stillframe animation
10 frames per second
2015







Stills from the *aping seeing* animation series
aping 2
Stillframe animation
10 frames per second
2015



Stills from the *aping seeing* animation series
seeing 3
Stillframe animation
10 frames per second
2015



aping blinking seeing
Megan Erasmus



aping blinking seeing exhibition 2015
Unisa Art Gallery

Installation Details





Installation details of the *blinking* series
aping blinking seeing exhibition 2015
Unisa Art Gallery



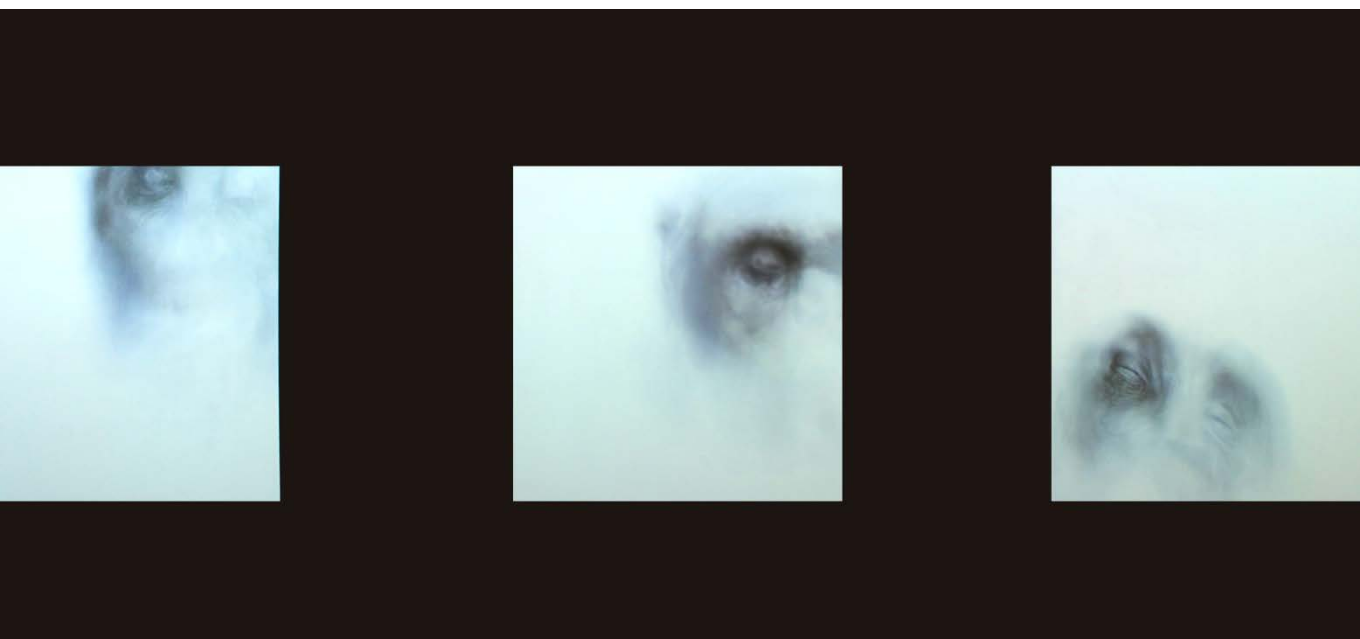




Installation detail of the *blinking* series
aping blinking seeing exhibition 2015
Unisa Art Gallery

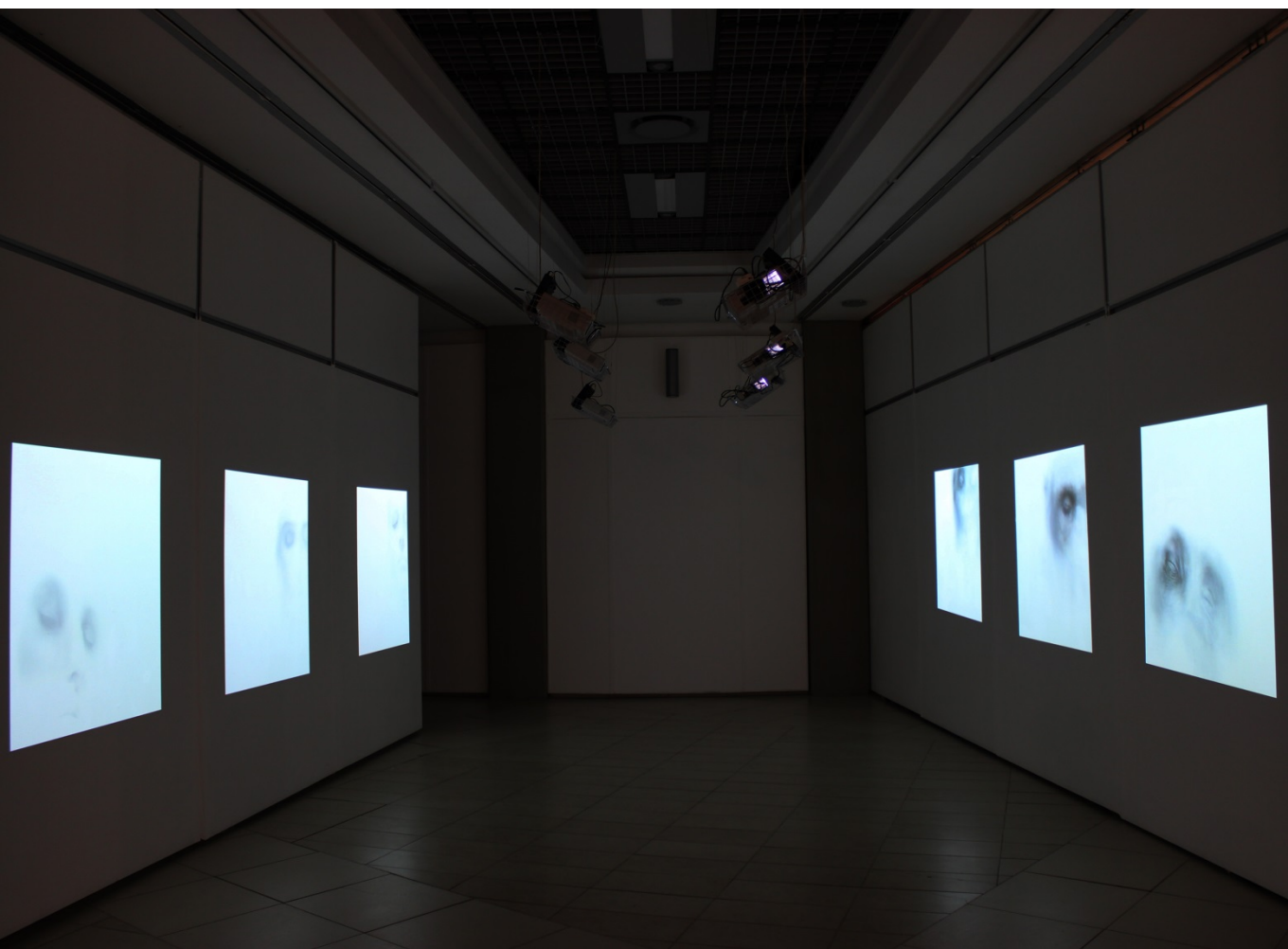






Installation details of the *aping seeing* stillframe animation series
aping blinking seeing exhibition 2015
Unisa Art Gallery





aping blinking seeing: Epilogue

"With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he also was an illusion, that someone else was dreaming him" (Borges 1964).

The contribution that biotechnology has made in the survival and advancement of the human race is inevitable. However, this exhibition aims to shed light on specific scenarios where ethical procedures and legislation are not practiced or understood. In South Africa, the transgenic art movement is underdeveloped, a large percentage of the public is unfamiliar with it. This exhibition aims to shed light on these matters, because the manipulation of the blueprint of life and the dangers that come with it is a global issue.

This exhibition portrays my impression of beings dreamed up by biotechnologists, scientists and transgenic artists. The suffering portrayed by my created non-human persons reflects an external visual opinion of what I believe happens internally to living beings when proper ethical procedures are not considered and applied, especially in the field of transgenic art where the boundaries between art, science and ethics grow dim. The animations portray my desire to understand and experience. By mimicking my subject-matters and visa verse, I metaphorically engage with their suffering, as if I too am being dreamed up. It is a warning to be aware of what is possibly to come if human beings become the subject-matters of future experimentations. Will possible dangerous scenarios be prevented? Transgenic art creates a communicative space for a variety of voices which range from deep concern to extreme enthusiasm for modern approaches to the life sciences.

One of the reasons why the transgenic art of Eduardo Kac can be a vehicle to achieve this, lies in the fact that transgenic artworks such as *GFP Bunny* (2000) offer a "...fresh vision of new trends in science and also of their probable inherent problems" (Vallverdú 2006:7). This concept is also known as 'watchdog' art. This exhibition aims to do the same; mimicking the trends in transgenic art, monkey see monkey do. However, the conscious decision not to use living matter as medium for this exhibition, contributes to the concerns of the well-being of the previously damaged, the currently manipulatable and the future unimaginable.

This exhibition portrays experiments and unfinished stories, aiming to emphasize the uncertainty that the biotechnological era holds for natural life in future. Even though some transgenic artworks strive to provide a platform for these same discussions and warnings, the debate on ethical practices to protect the voiceless living beings in transgenic art practices is in itself paramount. If the public is brought to a more fruitful dialogue with the oeuvre of transgenic art and biotechnology, the exhibition would have succeeded in establishing a point of view of not anti-science, but of pro-humanities.

Bibliography

Beagle, P. 1991. *The Last Unicorn*. New York: New American Library.

Borges, JL. 1983. *The Circular Ruins*. Germany: Umlaut. Camille, M. 1996. *Simulacrum in Critical Terms for Art History*. Available: <http://faculty.washington.edu/cbehler/glossary/simulacr.html>

Casady, M. 2012. Oliver, chimpanzee with humanlike traits, dies. Available: <http://www.chron.com/life/article/Oliver-chimpanzee-with-humanlike-traits-dies-3608813.php> Catts O & Zurr, I. 2003.

The ethical claims of Bio Art: Killing the other or self-cannibalism? Available: www.tca.uwa.edu.au/publication/TheEthicalClaimsofBioart.pdf

Corballis, M. 2011. *The Recursive Mind: The Origins of Human Language, Thought and Civilization*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

deBuys, W. 2015. *The Last Unicorn: A Search for One of Earth's Rarest Creatures*. London: Hachette uk.

deBuys, W. 2015. *Tomgram: William deBuys, A Global War on Nature*. Available: www.tomdispatch.com/post/175968/tomgram%3A_william_debuys%2C_a_global_war_on_nature/

Ely, J. 2008. Oliver. Available: <http://pin.primate.wisc.edu/aboutp/myths/oliver.html>

Ely, J, Leland, M, Martino, M, Swett, W, & Moore, C,. 1998. Technical report: chromosomal and mtDNA analysis of Oliver. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 105(3): 395-403. Available: [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/\(SICI\)1096-8644\(199803\)105:3%3C395::AID-AJPA8%3E3.0.CO;2-Q/epdf](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/(SICI)1096-8644(199803)105:3%3C395::AID-AJPA8%3E3.0.CO;2-Q/epdf)

Kac, E. 2007. Art that looks you in the eye: Hybrids, clones, mutants, synthetics, and transgenics, in *Signs of life: Bio art and beyond*, edited by E Kac. London: MIT Press.

"Mutant" Chimp Gets Gene Check. 1996. The American Association for the Advancement of Science. Available:
<http://www.sciencemag.org/content/274/5288/727.1.short>

Oliver The Chimp Part 1 of 6. 2007. Available:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-C6NkRUbI38> The Last Unicorn.
2011. dvd. Lions Gate, Santa Monica, California.

Tiffany, D. 2000. *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric*. California: University of California Press.

Vallverdú, J. 2006: Bioethical art: Genome sense construction through artistic interactions. *Aesthetika* 2(2): May: 7-16. Available:
www.aesthetika.org/IMG/pdf/Bioethical_art.pdf (accessed on 08-09-2013).

List of Illustrations

Figure 01: The creation process, 2015.....	10
Figure 02: The layering process, 2015.....	11
Figure 03: The subtraction process, 2015.....	12
Figure 04: The creation process, 2015.....	14
Figure 05: The selection process, 2015.....	15
Figure 06: The selection process, 2015.....	16
Figure 07: Untitled, Edition 1/12, 2015.....	20
Figure 08: Untitled, Edition 1/12, 2015.....	22
Figure 09: Untitled, Edition 1/12, 2015.....	24
Figure 10: Untitled, Edition 1/12, 2015.....	26
Figure 11: Untitled, Edition 1/12, 2015.....	28
Figure 12: Untitled, Edition 1/12, 2015.....	30
Figure 13: Untitled, Edition 1/12, 2015.....	32
Figure 14: Untitled, Edition 1/12, 2015.....	34
Figure 15: Untitled, Edition 1/12, 2015.....	36
Figure 16: Stills: <i>aping seeing</i> animation series, Seeing 1, 2015.....	39
Figure 17: Stills: <i>aping seeing</i> animation series, Aping 1, 2015.....	41
Figure 18: Stills: <i>aping seeing</i> animation series, Seeing 2, 2015.....	43
Figure 19: Stills: <i>aping seeing</i> animation series, Aping 2, 2015.....	44
Figure 20: Stills: <i>aping seeing</i> animation series, Seeing 3,, 2015.....	45
Figure 21: Stills: <i>aping seeing</i> animation series, Aping 3, 2015.....	46
Figure 22: Installation detail: <i>aping seeing blinking</i> exhibition, 2015.....	47
Figure 23: Installation detail: <i>aping seeing blinking</i> exhibition, 2015.....	48
Figure 24: Installation detail: <i>blinking</i> series, 2015.....	49
Figure 25: Installation detail: <i>blinking</i> series, 2015.....	50
Figure 26: Installation detail: <i>blinking</i> series, 2015.....	51
Figure 27: Installation detail: <i>blinking</i> series, 2015.....	52
Figure 28: Installation detail: <i>blinking</i> series, 2015.....	54
Figure 29: Installation detail: <i>aping seeing</i> stillframe animation series, 2015.....	55
Figure 30: Installation detail: <i>aping seeing</i> stillframe animation series, 2015.....	56
Figure 31: Installation detail: <i>aping seeing</i> stillframe animation series, 2015.....	57
Figure 32: Installation detail: <i>aping seeing</i> stillframe animation series, 2015.....	58

Acknowledgements

I am humbled by this opportunity and would like to acknowledge that through the grace of God, I have learned invaluable lessons and skills throughout this process. Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Ania Krajewska, for her thoughtful guidance throughout this creative process. To the staff members of the Unisa Art Gallery, thank you for the technical assistance and support. I would like to thank Brand Botha for his technical input. To Henk Botha for your creative musical influence and collaborated composition of the sound. To my parents, Stephen and Karen, thank you for your invaluable contribution to all parts of my life. To my family, thank you for your backing and upliftment throughout this entire process. Lastly to my husband Dawid, you are my pillar and my light.

About the Artist



Megan Erasmus is a South African visual artist. She obtained a Masters degree in Visual Arts in 2015 at the University of South Africa. She obtained her BA (Fine Arts) degree at the University of Pretoria in 2009. She engages with interdisciplinary research, specifically in the fields of biotechnology and art.

Erasmus is currently employed at the Unisa Art Gallery as art researcher for the Unisa Permanent Art Collection. She has also been appointed as project manager and curator for various exhibitions, including the annual #SmArtists Art Exhibition, Unisa Staff Exhibition: Response for 2015 and the MVA Student Art Exhibition 2015. She serves on the marketing committee, the gallery operations committee and the gallery board committee. She is also involved in community engagement projects and projects inspiring education through art.

Erasmus continues to participate in group exhibitions and national art competitions such as the Masters in Visual Arts Student Exhibition 2015, Unisa Art Gallery, Unisa Staff Exhibition 2015: Response, Unisa Art Gallery, Johannesburg Art Fair (2010), Sasol New Signatures Finalist Exhibition, Pretoria Art Museum (2010), BA Fine Arts Final Year Student Exhibition, The Battisphere Gallery, Pretoria Boys High School (2009), Group exhibition, Fried Art Gallery, Pretoria (2009), Student group exhibitions, University of Pretoria (2007-2009). Her work is also included in the Permanent public collection, State Library, Pretoria, Monitoring South Africa, Centurion and other private collections.

Contact Details

Megan Erasmus

+27 72 413 8808

meganerasmusart@gmail.com

© Copyright reserved by the artist. No copies of this catalogue or images included may be printed, reproduced or distributed without written consent from the artist.

