

Glow-in-the-dark bacterias of substance  
Julie Rene de Cotret's bioart investigations  
by Irene Loughlin

Julie Rene de Cotret's flexible definition of bioart encompasses wide-ranging activity that engages the symbiotic relationships existing between contemporary art and scientific/biological investigations. At once primarily sculptural, and at times poetic, humorous, startling, and exploratory, the works probe the interiorities of both individual organisms and systems of operations. Rene de Cotret's observations cause us to question both the boundaries of bioart as a mode of practice, and the social systems informing our lives and under which we often unquestioningly operate.

Rene de Cotret began her lecture at The Conference of New Technology and Digital Culture in a characteristically irreverent manner. As an artist primarily concerned with the somewhat anarchistic dissolution of boundaries, she opened the lecture with the hot shit sculpture, a bronze pile of shit encasing a repurposed coffee maker element that heats the sculpture from within. The work addressed elitism in the arts and was first exhibited at Scat: Thirty Years of Crap in Contemporary Art. This degraded and biodegradable material was transformed into a fine art object via the bronzing process, a historically referential technique geared towards producing an object of high quality and financial worth. Playing with the concept of expertise both as an artist and a bioart investigator, she noted her familiarity with the subject matter via the many animal companions in her life.

Rene de Cotret further identified herself as a biological being, both constrained and thriving within an economically predetermined set of living conditions, as a contemporary artist in Canada. She revealed images of living beside a cement factory/studio, surrounded by animals and plants, what she describes as "places where we weren't really supposed to live." She describes art-making as "a means of making sense of our surroundings". While at NASCAD, she noted the disposability of Tim Hortons culture in Nova Scotia as an oddity, having come from the perspective of growing up in Montreal, where such a disposable food culture is much less pervasive. She retrieved day old donuts from dumpsters in Nova Scotia, and was **fascinated** that these remnant objects had been categorized as 'food'. Her fascination became a precursor to her artistic concerns with the proliferation of genetically-modified foods. Reconstructing a timbits box out of metal and using auto paint to cover it, Rene de Cotret cast the discarded donuts she found and collected in clear resin, using the most noxious substance she could think of. The exchange value of materials (where the insignificant or discarded object is both resuscitated and elevated) is a strategy that follows her throughout her later practice.

In the work "Who do you love?", she creates a domestic space in the mode of a display found at IKEA or at home conventions. But rather than reproduce the expected polish of the convention booth as an installation work, the GMO corn patterned wallpaper in Rene de Cotret's display is worn and exposed to the elements, and hand drawn rather than mechanically reproduced, on a chipboard with marker. This patterned wall flanks an alcove containing a outlined, marker drawn gas stove meant to comment on the use of ethanol in GMO corn, and how such chemicals literally seep into our domestic kitchens. The line drawings of this display are reminiscent of instructional booklet drawings that arrive with furniture that needs to be unpacked and pieced together by the buyer. Similarly, the work contains a kind reminder of the underlying natural re-

sources, the gas lines and foodstuffs, as the absent pieces that prop up the sanitized version of the kitchen demo model.

The work *Material melange of style, violence, and comfort* is a large, inflated sculpture created from green and gold plastic, colours symbolic of the transformation of natural resources into money. The sculpture communicates an inflated sense of self, returning to the somewhat difficult aesthetics of the earlier work, *hot shit*. Rene de Cotret talks about the significance of pile forms as being iconic to everything that we do and make, as made evident in the harvesting, separation, consumption and disposal of objects. We can only think of the piles of garbage in urban dumps to see the truth in this statement, or the mounds of dirt next to piles of sorted materials on construction sites. Similarly, the work "Near Earth Object" (in collaboration with Amy Dunning) a 4 foot, interior lit plexiglass cube perched on a diagonal is propped up by wooden horses and embedded in a pile of slag from the Sudbury mines. Riffing on the theory that 'life on earth started in Sudbury' (since the sciences have a multitude of theories for all things), shards of plexiglass are scattered amongst the slag as metaphorical evidence of the meteor's impact. The artists wanted to draw attention to this theory of popular, almost mythic proportions - that of the Sudbury meteor which had penetrated the earth's crust containing bacteria on its underside. Once embedded in the earth, this bacteria had triggered all of life.

For such an elevated substance, however, bacteria is not generally welcomed aesthetically in the realm of contemporary art. As an artist in residence and later, as Director of the residency at the School of Environmental Science at the University of Guelph, Rene de Cotret revelled in the various research projects she discovered scientists undertaking at the university, such as the experiments growing tomatoes in zero gravity chambers, the cow with the glass stomach, and the observations of bumble bees in zero gravity. She noted, however, that her enthusiasm was not shared by all viewers. In a world inundated with end of the world scenarios, and at a time when the H1N1 virus scare was in full swing, bacteria as an art form was, and has been, viewed with repulsion and suspicion. Rene de Cotret created artworks challenging these reactions. In a work displayed in the University cafeteria, she cast her hand in rubber, touched a door handle, and then shook her own sculptural hand. She placed the work within an airtight plexiglass presentation box, and within 3 days the sculpture began to exhibit bacteria in its multifarious forms. Although popular with scientists at the University, who relayed that it would take weeks of testing and observation to identify each particular spore correctly, Julie noted that, in general, "No one likes the work" (although she herself found it aesthetically compelling). Playing upon the knee jerk reactions of repulsion to bioart, she also collaborated with a scientist at Guelph university and used glow-in-the-dark bacteria to both humorously heighten awareness and warn students of spreading germs via the unhygienic practices of not washing their hands, rubbing their faces etc. The humour of the after(bacteria)glow of these actions were however somewhat lost on the institution and the work was investigated for its adherence to bio ethics standards.

One of Rene de Cotret's first projects at the School for Environmental Science was to make hollowed hands out of beeswax and hang the sculpture in a honeycomb at the University. She imagined that the sculpture would be completed by the bees as a kind of 'interspecies' collaboration, however the bee population was too minimal for the work to ever be completed. Julie noted that the work often doesn't end up anywhere or arrive at a conclusion, because science is like that. She states, "You have theories, you try them out, the result is variable." This is not unlike studio practice where failure is inevitable on the way to reaching the completion of an artwork, and practice-based research can take one down dead end paths. She noted that particu-

lary since 911, the work of scientists is highly regulated; they are expected to apply a stringent bioethics code in order to justify the use of bacteria in their work. Artists are not so used to this kind of monitoring of their creative process. At times, Rene de Cotret abandoned the institution's stringent guidelines in order to allow herself greater artistic freedom at home in her studio. She noted however, the spirit of support for her work at the School for Environmental Science was at times overwhelming. To realize one of her works, she was granted 60 square meters of land to work with. She created an image of a tree canopy from above, by spreading fertilizer in the shadow area of trees. Then driving a tractor, she sprayed the grass area amongst the trees with vinegar, effectively turning the grass yellow. The School also invited her to view the work from above by airplane, and the aerial and topographical documentation of this work is arresting. A painterly image of the tree shadows and their surroundings through contrasting colour swatches of black, yellow and green, illustrate the interdisciplinary merger of science and bioart techniques with the contemporary, action painting aspects of this work.

There are traces of humour, loss and defiance in some of Rene de Cotret's most recent undertakings. Having spent time in Athens, Greece in 2013, she wanted to comment on the ridiculous **results** of EEU strategies which had resulted in raising taxation of Greek property by 46%. The events of the economic downturn served to deconstruct the home as a marker of stability. Rene de Cotret noted that the ideal home, with so much money and effort invested in it, actually didn't generally evolve according to the occupants changing needs. Despite the pristine quality of the architecture and interior design, the homes were subject to abandonment and decay by the economic, viral force that was spreading throughout Europe. In a video projection loop, Rene de Cotret responded to these conditions by adding chickens to an exquisitely designed, modern kitchen. In her video series, a neighbourhood goat is found in a posh bathroom, and a donkey feeds from a plush living room carpet. Noting another layer to the last sequence of this work, she describes the importance of the donkey to Greek culture, as everything was constructed via this animal prior to the advent of the motor. The return of animals and organic materials to Greek homes in Rene de Cotret's video focuses on the collapse of social structures such as the sanitized, contemporary home, edifices that are generally viewed as immune to environmental decay.

Returning home to conclude her presentation the Conference of New Technology and Digital Culture, Julie describes the rural area of Elora where she lives, a place in which the company Nestle syphons off a million litres a day of water for very little return. The artist installed Nestle Pure Life signage not far from the Nestle plant in her area, with a maple leaf bleeding into the family figures at the bottom of the poster. In another video loop to be exhibited in Seoul, Korea and London, England, she enters and exits the frame on an empty rural path near her home. No markers or people are evident, and the path is seemingly in the middle of nowhere. Cycling past us on a lowrider bike, she drags a tree on fire behind her. The work references the Canadian tar sands and the casual use of resources as both leisure and entertainment. Seemingly oblivious to the alarming nature of this action, and in trying to identify the culprit, we catch view of her lumberjacket as she pedals past us quickly on a hipster bicycle. She seems somewhat out of place, caught somewhere between the rural and the urban, a place often constituted as the sidelines of culture. Drifting through this cultural landscape, an unspectacular scene of Canada, nothing happens during this five minute loop beyond the startling humour and menace of the action of the burning tree suddenly being dragged on the path. The tree exits our line of vision as quickly as it enters and everything remains as it was, until the moment repeats. It is symbolic of the vision Rene de Cotret relates to us regarding her investigations into biology and social structure at the crossroads of environmental concern and economic deterioration.