



December 8, 2004 - February 25, 2005

Betty Rymer Gallery, School of the Art Institute of Chicago

YOUgenics

Opening reception: Wednesday, December 8, 5:00 - 7:00 p.m.

Curator's talk: December 8, 6:30 p.m.

Exhibiting artists include Natalie Bookchin, Heath Bunting, Thomas Cobb, Mark Cooley, Critical Art Ensemble, Beatriz da Costa, Deborah Koons Garcia, Ryan Griffis/Temporary Travel Office, Beth Hall, Dinh Q. Lê, Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, Alan Montgomery, Kerry Morrison/Dr. Alicia Prowse, Claire Pentecost, William C. Raines, subRosa, Paul Vanouse, and Gail Wight.

Related programs

Panel discussion: "Rounding Up the Unusual Suspects: Art in the Age of Biotechnology and the Patriot Act," Thursday, February 17, 6:00 p.m., School auditorium, 280 S. Columbus Drive (free admission)

Performances by subRosa: Friday, February 18, 12:00 - 1:00 p.m. and 4:30 - 6:00 p.m., Betty Rymer Gallery (free admission)

Screening: Friday, February 18, 6:00 p.m., School auditorium, 280 S. Columbus Drive (free admission). Featured works include Oliver Ressler's "Rote Zora," Diane Nerwen's "Under the Skin Game," Gwynne Basen's "On the Eighth Day."

Curator's Statement

Eugenics: from the Greek *eugenes*, "good in birth." Coined by Francis Galton in 1883 to describe the "science" of selective breeding.

To Galton, and other eugenicists, this science "is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but... takes cognizance of all influences that tend in however remote degree to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing..." The theoretical underpinning of eugenics is derived from Mendelian genetics – the belief that genes directly control the physical characteristics of living things – taken to the point of "genetic determinism" – the belief that genetic material is the key to all human characteristics.

Building on Darwin's theory of natural selection, especially as he applied it to human evolution in the *Descent of Man* (1871), many Europeans and Anglo-Americans feared that biologically ill-suited populations were being allowed to prosper, at the detriment of the human race. This fear, combined with the advent of new imaging technologies allowing for the study of microscopic biology, created an atmosphere conducive to eugenic practice, which was seen as "applied human genetics." Galton

and others called for both a “negative” (the denial of reproductive rights) and “positive” (the encouragement of certain traits through reproduction) application of genetics.

During the first third of the 20th Century, eugenics was fairly well respected in both Europe and the US. Madison Grant, a leading conservationist, and president of the New York Zoological Society, wrote in 1916:

Mistaken regard for what are believed to be divine laws and a sentimental belief in the sanctity of human life tend to prevent both the elimination of defective infants and the sterilization of such adults as are themselves of no value to the community.

While eugenics came under heavy criticism, and was eventually completely dismissed as a scientific term by mid century, many argue that it has merely changed in name and appearance. Genetic determinism (viewing heredity as the key to living characteristics) has become a popular way to understand everything from diseases to intellectual ability and can be found in popular culture as well as academic writing. Earlier eugenicists like Frederick Osborn asserted that eugenics would never be successful as a forceful policy, but would flourish as a voluntary, consumer driven practice. Within a social environment that accepts the patenting of organisms and health care as a commodity, what has failed as a science may succeed as a business.

It is this shift from a consciously planned program of institutionally regulated reproduction to one that plays upon individual and personal desires that forms the background for YOUgenics. It is the supposed identification of the “gay” and “intelligence” genes, the use of genetic testing for insurance risk assessment, and the promises of genetic therapies to cure hereditary diseases that take the eugenics movement into the twenty first century, for better or worse. But it is also driven by the speculative “land grab” of biological materials, what Critical Art Ensemble has termed the “Molecular Invasion” of capital and Vandana Shiva calls “biopiracy.” The “science” of eugenicists like Galton and Osborn becomes the “business” of Monsanto and GlaxoSmithKline.

Since it’s public outing in the 1973 Asilomar I Conference, transgenic technologies (the combining of genetic material from different categories of organisms) have been highly controversial. This is no more apparent than in the global battles over genetically modified organisms (GMOs) that, in the US, comprise a majority of such staple foods as corn and soybeans. The apparent contradictions in the US policy towards genetic and transgenic research, a policy supporting the worldwide proliferation of GMO agriculture and pharmaceutical and military weapons production, yet seemingly against furthering stem cell research, are in need of investigation from many perspectives.

YOUgenics is a small, and incomplete, attempt to explore these questions. Through the open-ended and participatory experiences provided by the

included artists, it is hoped that visitors can engage with the discussion from perspectives that are often denied in the dominant discourse. The innovative framing of the problems of genetics found in these artists' works hopefully provides a space to reconsider the role of the larger public in discussing and forming policy regarding the technologies that are changing our sources of food, medicine and reproduction.

Ryan Griffis

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Gallery hours: Tuesday - Saturday, 10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

YOUgenics: art interrogating genetic technologies
<http://www.yougenics.net>