

LIFE AS KITSCH. NOTES ABOUT BIO ART

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BIO ART VS. KITSCH

Bio art has existed approximately since the late 1980s. Initially it was identified mainly with ‘genetic art’, which reduced itself to the visualization of DNA by means of traditional techniques, such as painting or graphic art, and images made with the use of genetic algorithms and genetic programming. Gradually, however, artists began to use tools specific to molecular biology and genetic engineering as means of expression. In the course of time, they paid less attention to computer software and focused on the creation of physical biological objects: genetically modified cells, strains of bacteria, tissues or complex organisms. Today bio art is associated with this type of activity – with the adaptation of solutions offered by biotechnological sciences for the purpose of creating living works of art. These activities are the subject-matter of a discussion where most opinions emphasize the importance of such experiments for fundamental findings on what life is and for understanding the status of the creatures created by means of technology that have not existed in nature so far. Post-human discourses, such as aesthetics of care, non-anthropocentric aesthetics or ‘zoe-aesthetics’ postulated by Monika Bakke (2012), are only a few examples of such reflections. In what sense, however, can works fundamentally reduced to the semantic scope of the term ‘kitsch’ serve as a basis for such discussions? It might seem that, from the moment of entering specialized laboratories and using specific technologies in the creation process, artists have all means at their disposal to problematize the phenomenon of life or issues concerning its manipulation or the patenting of genetic codes by large corporations. To what extent, however, are such topics brought up in works in which we come across colorful butterflies, ornamental flowers

or a fluorescent rabbit? Clement Greenberg (1961: 10) wrote that ‘kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times’. Since kitsch represents what is spurious in our life, can we use it for making general statements concerning the fundamentals of life? Can kitschy artifacts serve as the starting point for a serious discussion on fundamental questions? Can living objects that often bring back the memory of phantasms and products created by popular culture tell us something about life? What can we learn about life from an art that is only a manifestation of bad taste at first glance? What does kitsch tell us about life? Before reflecting upon these questions, let us define the semantic scope of this concept.

WHAT IS KITSCH?

Most researchers agree that the word ‘kitsch’ is derived from the German expression *etwas verkitschen*, which means ‘to knock off cheaply’ (Kulka 1988). This term is connected with aesthetic judgment and the category of taste, at the same time having a clearly pejorative or rather devaluing connotation. Kitsch refers to a cultural product that is deliberately tailored to mass tastes. It means ‘both an art of happiness and an expression of bad taste’ (Riout 2014: 583). Paul Maltby (2012: 53) thinks that kitsch is ‘a contentious and problematic concept. First, it is ineluctably judgmental: once identified as kitsch, a work of art is instantly devalued, the taste of its admirers disparaged and derided. Second, the concept is exclusionary and classist: as a label, kitsch often serves to stigmatize art that does not conform to an aesthetic canon as determined by elite arbiters of taste’. However, Maltby (ibid.: 54), quoting Irving Howe’s *Notes on Mass Culture*, also notices that kitsch is useful because it makes it easier to recognize consumable types of art that ensure ‘amusement without insight, and pleasure without disturbance’. Tomas Kulka (1988: 18) suggests that ‘kitsch isn’t simply an artistic failure – a work which has somehow gone wrong. There is something special about kitsch which sets it apart from the rest of bad art’. Where does this uniqueness of kitsch lie? Is it some kind of formatting artistic phenomena to the status of products intended for consumption? Kitsch is considered to be a phenomenon that emerged along with the formation of mass society

in the 19th century. The increasing amount of spare time played a significant role in the creation of products that can be assigned to this category. At that time, a need arose in mass societies to participate in a culture that provides easy entertainment and does not require recipients to be educated or particularly competent. Clement Greenberg (1961: 10) considered kitsch to be a product of the industrial revolution and a result of the settlement of large numbers of peasants in the cities as proletariat and petty bourgeois. 'Ersatz culture' was supposed to address the consumption needs of the masses that were unable to understand urban culture and, at the same time, had lost their interest in folk culture deriving from the place of their origin. In Greenberg's view, the strengthening of mass culture labeled as kitsch and the withdrawal of the ruling elites from the support of the avant-garde movement was a harbinger of the collapse of the culture shaping sensitivity, reflection and refinement.

Hermann Broch (2002: 195) interpreted the phenomenon of kitsch in the same manner. He thought that kitsch is an expression of 'radical evil' that leads to the destruction of the system of values. In his opinion, the power of kitsch lies in 'the confusion of the ethical category with the aesthetic category'. According to Broch, kitsch is supposed to give such pleasure that does not require intellectual effort or commitment from the recipient. Kitsch as such cannot be the material of a good work of art – a multi-level work whose form refers to a significant problem. Kitsch was also criticized by Walter Benjamin, who completely excluded this phenomenon from the field of art. Perceiving it as a separate phenomenon that is completely different from artistic activity, he negated the possibility of existence of 'kitschy art'. According to the findings of Winifred Menninghaus (2009: 41), a researcher dealing with this subject area in the German philosopher's writings, kitsch was treated by Benjamin as a practical object (in contrast to the 'selflessness' of art) that causes the absence of critical distance between it and the observer: 'kitsch offers instantaneous emotional gratification without intellectual effort, without the requirement of distance, without sublimation'. It is worth noticing here that such opinions and remarks concerning kitsch were popular among theoreticians roughly till the 1950s. The tendencies that emerged subsequently in the artistic world transformed kitsch and its perception by critics. Denys Riout (2014: 539) thinks that kitsch changed as a result of pop art, which blurred even further the values established by the avant-garde,

and as a result of ‘camp’, which was a sort of aesthetics promoting things in bad taste as amusing. Riout indicates that from that time on, artists not only created works that could be described in terms of kitsch, but they also deliberately combined elements pleasing the recipient’s eye with revolting motifs. This was how kitsch changed its image. It was no longer perceived only as an indication of bad taste, but also as the deliberate exploitation of motifs identified with bad taste, which also served as a starting point for an analysis of complex problems and critical insight. This type of activity based on the aware and deliberate use of kitsch is defined as post-kitsch by Maria Poprzęcka (1998). Works within its scope can be attractive for the broad audience: both for the spectator who perceives only the outer layer of the project – an aspect of visual trumpery that brings pleasure and for the educated spectator who recognizes other senses and meanings beneath the façade of gloss.

THE FLUORESCENT RABBIT

Let us come back to the question asked at the beginning of these deliberations: can a project that fits within the semantic scope of ‘kitsch’ be the basis for a discussion concerning life? We will try to answer this question by considering the case that I regard as the most emblematic for bio art: the fluorescent rabbit called Alba. *GFP Bunny* by Eduardo Kac is an example of transgenic art – a certain tendency distinguished by Kac within the scope of bio art. As the artist himself says: ‘it is a new art form based on the use of genetic engineering techniques to transfer synthetic genes to an organism or to transfer natural genetic material from one species into another, to create unique living beings’ (Kac 1998). Alba came into being in 2000. It was created in close co-operation between the artist and scientists working for the INRA (Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique) in Jouy-en-Josas, France. It was the only one of many scientific institutions capable of carrying out such action at that time which agreed to help the artist accomplish his goal. The creation of a transgenic animal was based on direct interference in the genome. This operation resulted in the creation of a hybrid creature – an albino rabbit into whose zygote a synthetic mutation of the fluorescence gene that is naturally present in *Aequorea victoria*

jellyfish was injected. Being a double mutant¹, Alba apparently does not differ from other pigmentless rabbits, but it emits an intense bright green light in adequate conditions – after irradiation with rays of specific frequency. If the ultimate goal of the project were to create a nice-looking domesticated miniature rabbit that additionally emits a green afterglow like in fairy tales, this project could be regarded as a glorification of kitsch. However, the artist indicates that the creation of a new creature by way of genetic modifications was only the starting point of this processual project. Kac notes that his work ‘comprises the creation of a green fluorescent rabbit, the public dialogue generated by the project, and the social integration of the rabbit’ (Kac 2003: 97). The second part of the project started when the news about the birth of the creature was made public. It encompassed all reactions concerning the creation of Alba: a public debate, an open protest against such practices, controversies and the censoring of the project by the then director of the INRA, who refused to release the fluorescent pet from the laboratory. The last event pushed the second phase of the project in an unexpected direction, resulting in protests of defenders of artistic activity of the pioneer of bio art and delaying the last stage of the project that was to include transferring the animal to the property of its creator, integrating it with the new environment, experiencing daily interactions with it and, most of all, taking responsible care of it. It is worth noting that *GFP Bunny* has never been shown in public. The transgenic rabbit was finally transported to the artist’s house, but it has never been exhibited as a living artifact at a gallery. The exhibition strategy of the project covered the presentation of photographs, posters, the documentation of laboratory works, as well as public debates and discussions, which eventually took place in Alba’s absence.

Here I would like to look at arguments used by opponents and critics of the project, hoping that they will allow us to determine how kitsch is defined and how it manifests itself in Kac’s project.

One of the reasons for the harsh criticism directed at the work was its alleged ‘decadence’ expressed by endowing a white rabbit with an utterly

¹ Alba is not only the result of the modification based on the injection of the fluorescence gene into the rabbit’s zygote, because albino rabbits themselves are a recessive natural mutation deliberately multiplied by people.

useless capability that is specific to a certain species of jellyfish, in which the occurrence of this kind of protein is functionally justified. Thus, the Brazilian artist's work was reduced to the level of a meaningless and visually attractive gadget, to the level of surface and superficiality and regarded as a tasteless experiment that goes as far as to use a living creature to the fulfillment of an contemptible base goal. Steve Tomasula (2002: 143), when undertaking this issue and referring to other works based on experiments with genes, ironically presents another aspect concerning the alleged uselessness of such projects from the perspective of research: 'Alba, like Davis's Venus², like other works of genetic art, will not be used to research cancer or any other medical condition. And since they are 'useless', they are seen as 'decadent' – as decadent as the ornamental, i.e. non-pragmatic, goldfish and flowers destroyed by the Red Guard during Mao's Cultural Revolution'. Assuming that the author of these works is not a supporter of the rule of a communist dictator, we can feel that the accusation concerning uselessness seems absurd to him and he regards it as a consequence of ignorance, commenting upon the work abstracted from the broader context presented by the artist and, finally, the trivialization of problems brought up by the work and its reduction to the inadequate definition of *objet d'art*, according to which the essence and the ultimate goal of Kac's actions was the creation of a fluorescent mascot – a useless ornament.

² Tomasula writes here about the project by Joe Davis, which also fits into the paradigm of bio art. *Microvenus* is a simple graphic symbol resembling the intercrossed letters 'Y' and 'I'. It is a Germanic rune symbolizing life and schematically drawn female genitals. Davis's project assumed the placement of this sign in the genome of a bacterium, its multiplication as a result of the reproduction of microorganisms, and then sending into space so that a sign of human intelligence could reach extraterrestrial creatures. The fulfillment of this intention involved the translation of graphic information into biological information; the run was initially digitized and then translated into a chain of 28 DNA nucleotides. Synthetic molecules with coded information were put in *E. coli* bacteria – a strain responsible for proper digestion, which was used for NASA research because of their resistance to extreme weather conditions. The bacteria quickly proliferated in the laboratory beaker; millions of cells came into being, each of which contained the identical picture entitled *Microvenus*.

As we know, Alba's birth was only the starting point of the project, whereas Kac (2003: 98) in his proposed conception of transgenic art firmly rejects the creation of finished artifacts that have no development potential: 'As a transgenic artist, I am not interested in the creation of genetic objects, but on the invention of transgenic social subjects. In other words, what is important is the completely integrated process of creating the bunny, bringing her to society at large, and providing her with a loving, caring, and nurturing environment in which she can grow safe and healthy'. Kac counts on working out an aesthetics emphasizing social rather formal aspects of life. The creation of a fluorescent creature is supposed to be the beginning of a long process initiating a debate concerning the limits of genetic manipulation, art and good taste. The green rabbit is not supposed to be a value itself – a strange finished artifact, but an inspiration to reflect upon difference, on artistic ethics, on the attitude of recipients to genetically modified organisms. The artist also frequently stresses the need to take special care of these exceptional creatures and to integrate them with other unmodified creatures. In spite of this artistic explication of the project, many critical voices were heard, indicating that it is 'ornamental', which means superficial – it is difficult to look for senses and meanings intended by the artist under the layer of iced pop-culture decorativeness.

The issue of ornamentality that recurs in the most recent artistic practices was developed in an interesting manner by Gunalan Nadarajan (2007: 43), who also skillfully defends the 'fluorescent rabbit'. Although Nadarajan agrees that we currently observe a shift towards ornaments and decorativeness in art – particularly the one that uses biotechnological manipulations, he also notices that it is a kind of subversive action. He suggests that artists deliver a critical evaluation of these processes using the same methods that are applied in 'ornamental biotechnology', which means the 'scientific research into, manipulation and creation of life forms for ornamental purposes'. Nadarajan establishes a special category of 'parergonal aesthetics', where 'where the ornament is deployed in order to unsettle notions of essentiality and functionality with reference to natural entities' (ibid.: 51). Although, in his view, *GFP Bunny* is a purely ornamental phenomenon, this is by no means tantamount to the semantic poorness of the work: 'It is fascinating to consider the broad aims and implications of the work when the primary

gesture and the most readily apparent aspect of the work is its fluorescence – an ornamental feature’ (ibid.: 52).

Parergonal aesthetics suspends the hierarchization and division of life aspects into more and less important ones – into those that justify biotechnological inquiries (e.g., solutions concerning human health) and into those that do not have such potential (the construction of a beautiful creature). ‘Why is it that dogs aren’t yet blue with red spots, and that horses don’t yet radiate phosphorescent colors over the nocturnal shadows of the land?’, asks Vilem Flusser (1988: 9). Nadarajan would probably answer that this happens because the ornament ceased to be empty and futile when it became a deliberately used tool of criticism that can provoke a debate dealing with fundamental issues (as in the case of Alba).

Here we reach the point in which our considerations assume a paradoxical direction. It turns out that a group of theoreticians uses critical opinions and accusations of decadence, uselessness and the use of semantically empty ornaments for deriving a line of defense of the project that refers to significant issues, such as the status of genetically modified organisms, their integration with the environment and the world of people and artistic ethics. Therefore, if we decided to describe the *GFP Bunny* project by means of the category of kitsch, we would be more inclined to adopt the interpretation proposed by Riout and Poprzęcka. In this context, Kac’s decision to create a fluorescent ‘pet’ would be a fully conscious and deliberate action aimed at arousing the interest of a large group of recipients not necessarily educated in the field of art not only in the creature itself, but also the subject area concerning transgenic creatures. Another argument for such perception of the work would be Kac’s resignation from the public presentation of the creature in the gallery space, where it could be exposed to stress concerning the presence of visitors. Maybe Alba, which has not been seen by anyone except the artist, his family and the personnel of the French laboratory responsible for its creation, was really supposed to be a serious project confirming the responsibility of researchers and artists and the possibilities concerning the use of biotechnology?

We can draw such conclusions about the project on the basis of opinions of its defenders responding to accusations concerning ‘decadence’, ornamentality and uselessness. Let us consider, however, with which image of biotechnology does *GFP Bunny* confront its recipients.

Undoubtedly, the series of lectures, workshops and public discussions that made up the exhibition strategy of the work can be regarded as socially useful. The creation of a nice-looking transgenic 'pet' accustoms people to genetic engineering, molecular biology and other branches of biological technologies that are usually perceived as hermetic fields using a difficult jargon that can be understood only by persons directly involved in it. This creates a space for a dialogue concerning current large-scale research and experiments that are not fully clear, comprehensible and obvious, thereby often serving as a basis for the reproduction of myths, prejudices and false presumptions. We must note, however, that the image of biotechnology offered by the project is a utopian vision of infinite possibilities. An average person learns that at this moment humanity possesses unlimited possibilities of manipulating nature and that such manipulation can bring forth nice-looking pet animals in which the interference in the genome did not result in complications, diseases or any other consequences decreasing the quality of the animal's life. Photographs and posters presenting a frequently reproduced image of a jumping green rabbit say nothing about dangers arising from the use of biological technologies, unsuccessful experiments, laboratory aberrations and the suffering of creatures in which interferences in the genome resulted in serious mutations excluding normal existence. There is another significant issue that the artist fails to not address. When interfering in the genome on the molecular level, we can never predict exactly the ultimate expression of modifications in the complex organism. Kac (2003: 100) states that he 'decided to proceed with the project because it became clear that it was safe'. But how could he be sure? If such presumption was based on earlier manipulations with genomes of other living creatures, maybe it was necessary to address those experiments, their results and consequences, even if this led to the disclosure of potential hazards connected with such activities and abnormalities resulting from them? We must also remember that rabbits, along with rats and mice, are popular experimental animals on which pharmaceutical products are tested, including gene therapies, cosmetics and other chemical components ultimately intended for people.

Does the fluorescent rabbit tell us anything about these issues? Do we learn what happens behind the closed doors of research institutes and specialized laboratories? Does the project allow for reflection on the fate of living testers, which is marked by pain and fear? Unfortunately, in the case

of this project, we stop at the conclusion that laboratory animals are fine, modifications of their genes bring a visually spectacular effect and they live long while being cared for by responsible scientists.

The ignorance of the aforementioned issues along with the promotion of the work as a responsibility-related project borders on hypocrisy or at least on the total lack of awareness of background elements of modern research in biology. Another ignored thing is the fact of patenting genomes of living creatures, particularly those having a market potential: the creatures whose commoditization can involve high financial profits. This refers mainly to animals that are fit for domestic breeding, such as the green rabbit. Kac fulfilled his famous project one year after scientists from the National University of Singapore patented a popular species of aquarium fish modified with the fluorescence gene, which makes them emit a bright green light, as in the case of Alba. Then scientists signed a contract with a large company Yorktown Technologies, assigning rights to the production and sale of genetically modified fish. In 2003, the species named GloFish began to be sold in zoological gardens in the United States. The author of *GFP Bunny* says nothing about the patenting of life and ethical implications of such actions; he also ignores completely the context of market trade in creatures of this kind and the problem of commodification of life. Because of this, contrary to what its defenders suggest, the work can be perceived as unjustified manipulation with the genome aiming at visual showiness and additionally shrouded in an idealistic and uncritical tale of the wonders of biotechnology. Therefore, it can be regarded as kitsch. Moreover, posters and photographs of the rabbit presented in the gallery space along with the affirmative and naive treatment of methods that made it possible to carry out the project can be essentially treated as an advertisement of possibilities offered by biotechnology.

Kac states that his goal was not to create the fluorescent rabbit as the final product, but to initiate a debate concerning significant issues in this way. Unfortunately, the trivialization of the debate concerning biological techniques and the ignorance of the broad consequences of their dissemination suggests that the project should rather be perceived as the final product addressing bad tastes.

Here, it is worth quoting the sentence of George Gessert (2010: 81), one of the representatives of the bio art trend. Gessert reverses the order

of the word 'kitsch', stating (in the same fashion as previously quoted Walter Benjamin) that this category describes market products rather than artistic creations. As an artist employing techniques similar to Kac's and crossing various species of flowering plants, Gessert criticises the mass production of genetically modified flowers, which he regards as kitschy. He believes that accusations concerning the lack of responsibility of artists working in the field of bio art are absurd, because, according to him, moral indifference is generated by kitsch in the form of market products. Even if Gessert is right, Kac's project was unfortunately formatted like a spectacular biotechnological... product, which is additionally shrouded in a tale of care and responsibility that I find totally unconvincing.

Let us come back to the question announced at the beginning of this text: what important things about life can we learn from a work classified as kitsch? Before trying to answer this question, I would like to clarify what I exactly mean when using the term 'life'. I hope that such comment will explain and justify my criticism and the devaluation of the Brazilian artist's creative work. My reflection on the meaning of the phenomenon of life begins with a fundamental issue: looking for its definition. At this stage, however, we come across a fundamental problem. It turns out that one cohesive and logical definition of this phenomenon, common and true for a certain class of objects and allowing us to distinguish between animate and inanimate matter, simply does not exist. An attempt to explain the phenomenon of life has been undertaken by almost all fields of science – from biology, physics and chemistry to human sciences. Mathematicians also looked for a solution to the formal definition of life. A huge section of philosophy – ontology – deals with the issues of being and existence. All of those fields have worked out their own understanding of life that stresses its different properties and characteristics. Consequently, however, the proliferation of definitions leads to disorientation: various conceptions are often mutually exclusive, some are contradictory, and the multitude of mental constructs excludes the possibility of clear determination whether we are dealing with life in the given instance or not. Edward Trifonov (2012: 647), a researcher in the Genome Diversity Center, Institute of Evolution, University of Haifa identified as many as 'one hundred and three definitions of the uncertain phenomenon', ultimately regarding all of them as imprecise and unsatisfactory.

The multitude of dissonant definitions includes also the alarming likelihood that life is a relative rather than absolute concept. Thomas Mann (1971: 274) wrote: ‘What was life? No one knew. It was undoubtedly aware of itself, so soon as it was life; but it did not know what it was’. Nearly one hundred years after the German writer’s conclusion, the state of our knowledge about life on the definition level looks similar. This is particularly alarming because today we can use tools that allow us to modify what we intuitively recognize as life. Still, however, we are unable to answer the question what is life. Until we come across its specific case, until we ‘see’ it, we will not recognize in an inexplicable and irrational way that we are dealing with it.

Assuming a certain definition as a verifying instance often led to the situation when certain phenomena were completely excluded from the sphere of life and regained the status of living creatures along with a different paradigm and a different definition a few years later. At this point, it is worth quoting an example of experiments conducted by the unmanned Viking spacecraft in 1976, the aim of which was to look for extraterrestrial life. Samples taken by the lander were examined through the prism of the restrictive metabolic definition, and certain observed changes were interpreted as chemical reactions in rocks at that time. Today, however, it turns out that they may have been signs of activity of microorganisms living on Mars, i.e., life, which was basically excluded by the metabolic definition. Thus, it seems that, faced with the helplessness of scientific definitions, we must rely on our views and feelings, regardless of how unscientific and non-methodological these techniques would be. With regard to determining what is life and what is not, we do not have any better method than non-rational and pre-conceptual feelings.

Kac’s work lacks the life that is exposed to view and can be experienced through senses. The presence of a genetically recombined organism was replaced with posters and photographs showing a fluorescent rabbit, but they might as well have been a result of manipulation in a graphic application. This means that the recipient cannot recognize life in *GFP Bunny*; in my view, he also fails to receive the impulse to enter a deeper level of reflection on both human and non-human life and on their mutual relations, because it only scratches the surface of kitschy visual representations. The fact is that the direct manipulation with genes from which the fulfillment of the project

started attracts the recipient's attention towards reflections on what is the biological basis of life. These issues were also presented during lectures and discussions conducted by the artist, when it was explained that the role of a genetic information carrier in living organisms is played by nucleic acids present in chromosomes. Both in the case of a human and a transgenic creature going beyond systematic categories, the foundation is the same. We only differ in the configuration in which individual compounds are arranged. This universal character of the life-coding material suggests that we are actually closer not only to the fluorescent rabbit, but also to any other less or more complex creatures and, in spite of significant differences, there is a bond of molecular materiality coding existence between us.

This observation serves as a reliable basis for post-human discourses that reject the anthropocentric paradigm. It turns out that the human being is not an isolated species; it is connected with other non-human forms of life. Moreover, Monika Bakke (2012: 241) indicates: 'without the non-human sphere there is nothing that is so human, but not because of negation, as it has seemed to us so far, but through communication and constant joint creation'. However, since Kac's project was really aimed at undertaking this subject area, was it actually necessary to create the enigmatic fluorescent rabbit that nobody has even seen? Eventually, the entire work gained the status of a social event and became a certain case-study, a phenomenon based on discussions and debates. Kac did not need a genetically modified fluorescent animal for activities like this. Nor did he need a legend that arose around the creature which could not be seen by anyone in public, or the kitschy halo of trashy pictures. This act, which bordered on mystification and the reduced the visual part of the work to posters and photographs of questionable quality, pushed Kac's work towards kitsch and substantially weakened the overtone of the debate, which, as the artist intended, would provoke a number of significant questions about human and non-human life and their mutual relationships.

However, since Alba actually came into being, it was necessary to take care of proper conditions allowing for its public presentation. Exhibitions featuring living, often also transgenic animals are nothing new; in spite of certain difficulties, they are not impossible to organize, either. It is worth quoting, for example, Katy High's project, in which the artist undertook the topic of transgenic laboratory rats with injected human genetic material.

High bought animals suffering with typical human diseases, ensured proper care to them and put them in the gallery space adapted in a manner resembling a laboratory. Those who visited this specific exhibition could feel the direct proximity of transgenic animals suffering for the good of humans.

In the case of Kac's work, the possibility of empirical contact with a transgenic creature would let recipients recognize life in it, and the experience as such would largely reinforce their commitment to the discussion concerning human relations with other non-human forms of life. Unfortunately, in the case of *GFP Bunny*, the audience received a trashy representation instead of the fluorescent rabbit and the unique experience of the recipient. My primary objection against the Brazilian artist's project concerns the absence of the title rabbit (assuming that it really came into being) and replacement of the presence of the unique creature with kitsch that discourages reflections and debate. If the animal was really created, I think it should have been shown in public. The questions of ensuring proper conditions during presentation would serve as another strong argument in the discussion on responsibility and care of non-human forms of life, on mutual relations between people and non-people.

If Kac did not plan to show *Alba* in public, maybe he should not have created it at all. In view of how the project was eventually presented, the creation of a transgenic animal seems unjustified, completely unfunctionalized and pretextual, and fluorescence itself appears to be an empty act aimed at complying with pop-cultural trends.

Moreover, the evaluation of the project offers some other alarming conclusions. If, as we have determined above, Kac's work is an affirmation of biotechnology in its expression, he accepts its interference in all levels of life, including human life. Since it is possible to modify a rabbit genetically, there are no obstacles to do the same with a human – this is the conclusion of the work. In this sense, the project legitimizes also gene therapies, the patenting of genes and the justification of the genetic profiling of patients, often without their knowledge and consent, with the need for research. There are no transparent technologies that would fail to involve certain changes and that have no impact on lives of people and non-people, and biotechnology is certain not one of them.

Unfortunately, Kac ignores these issues, so I am not convinced whether this project really concerns care and responsibility, as he assures. In my view,

in spite of what is often suggested by defenders of his work, kitsch is not a measure fulfilling critical or hard-hitting functions here; just the opposite.

As I have mentioned earlier, Kac counted on working out an aesthetics emphasizing social rather than formal aspects of life. However, is it possible to undertake seriously the subject of social aspects of life while ignoring completely the huge technology that helped to create life, its contexts, potential results and dangers involved in it? Is it possible to handle seriously the questions of care and responsibility, pay attention to post-human discourses rejecting the superior role of the human in favor of another life on Earth and, at the same time, propose a project from which an average recipient will only learn that we can manipulate with the life of other creatures in any desired manner with the help of technology that is not indifferent?

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Summary

Bio art is a specific trend of contemporary art practice, where artists adapt solutions offered by biosciences in order to create living works of art. Their actions are subject to a discussion with dominant voices concerning the significance of such experiments for the fundamental ascertainments concerning what life is, but also for understanding the status of these constructed entities, which have not existed in nature so far. Post-human discourses such as aesthetics of care, non-anthropocentric aesthetics and zoe-aesthetics are a few examples of this type of reflection. However, is it possible that works which could be described in terms of kitsch constitute a solid ground for this type of discussion? Clement Greenberg has written about kitsch that it is ‘mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times’. If kitsch represents everything that is spurious and non-authentic in our life, can we use it in order to make general statements concerning the basis of life? Can we make statements concerning the fundamental problem of life on the basis of projects that confront us with glow-in-the-dark rabbits or paintings created with genetically modified color bacteria? In my paper I would like to refer to these questions on the basis of an artwork that can be classified in terms of kitsch.

Keywords: kitsch, bio art, life, biotechnology, DNA, fluorescent rabbit