



The Arts & Genomics Centre

New Representational Spaces Programme

PhD-project: The dissemination of knowledge as a function of art

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Research aims

This PhD-project examines the specific ways in which art assimilates and represents the results and consequences of genomics research, and how art (and artists) contribute to the dissemination of knowledge. The aim of this project is to analyse the role or function of art as a mediator or disseminator of scientific knowledge, in order to better understand the intersections of art and genomics, and to explore which specific knowledge is considered as socially and culturally significant, and how this knowledge is communicated.

Conceptual tools The project will begin with a study of theories on the *function and qualities of art* in respect to science. Most relevant authors agree on the ‘creative’ or ‘imaginative’ function of art and some consider this as a common ground on which artists and (experimental) scientists can meet. ‘Imagination’ is considered as the best means to understand and communicate complicated and abstract scientific results (Van Dijck 1998, Franklin 1993/2003). However, what is exactly meant by ‘imagination’, and how is it used by artists to communicate scientific knowledge? What role does imagination play in the interactions between scientist, artist, and (lay) public? How should we understand the term ‘image’ in imagination? The imaginative function of art is founded on specific qualities of art; art provokes interpretations and transformations and is metaphoric in character (Nelkin/Lindee 1995, Anker 2001, Brodyk 2001, Kac 2002). How do these qualities function in the dissemination of scientific knowledge by works of art? Should we follow Anker (1995) as she states that art functions – through its specific qualities – as a matrix, “giving its subject the diagnostic ability of a paradox –the paradox of critical fiction”? Is art a way of knowing the world through fiction? For instance, Tomasula

(2002) states that bio-genetic art ‘imitates’ the immediacy of non-fiction. In regard to these specific qualities of art, some authors mention the critical dimensions of art: it makes the viewer aware of (fundamental) questions and problems of his or her time and world (Berry 2001, Kac 2002, Tomasula 2002, Hauser 2003).

Case-studies The theories on function and qualities of art are the theoretical context to two case-studies of intersections of art and genomics. The *first* case study focuses on *The Wellcome Trust*, which aims “to encourage public engagement with biomedical science and its wider cultural context”. The *Trust’s* views on the function of art and artists therein and the ways in which its goals are practically pursued, will be analysed. *The Wellcome Trust* developed a wide range of activities and instruments in which genetic research plays a mayor role: they encourage collaboration projects through the SciArt Award and Funds, they run a Gallery (TwoTen Gallery), engage actively in exhibition programs, sponsor publications, and recently they launched a website on genetic research. What are the views behind this policy, and how is it evaluated? The *second* case-study concerns the *Critical Art Ensemble*, a flexible artist group that launched different projects at various sites (galleries, hospitals, public places) and on the Internet. They focus specifically on genomics and genetic research. Their conviction is that communication of the results of genetic research is poor in character. Their goal is to inform the public, and to increase public awareness of the ethical, social, economic, and juridical consequences and questions arising from genomics research: “Through the collectives activity, members hope to replace a general fear with critical tools and replace public impotence with tools for direct action” (www.critical-art.net). The public has to be convinced of their new responsibilities and (personal) choices.

The Wellcome Trust and the *Critical Art Ensemble* will be considered as part of a larger field of institutions and projects with comparable objectives, such as Genomic Art (exhibition projects), ASCI (Art & Science Collaboration Inc.), or SymbioticA (artistic research laboratory in The School of Anatomy and Human Biology, University of Western Australia). The case-studies will explain the ways in which scientific knowledge is disseminated by art and how (with which means and methodological presuppositions) communication is accomplished. Important questions are: What is exactly communicated? Which artistic and scientific technologies, means and strategies are preferred in this communication? What role is played by the so-called new media, specifically the internet? Which objectives are attained? On which basis (theoretical and/or social) do scientists and artists meet, and what views on art, science and communication inform these meetings? The two case studies are inquiries into sources and reception, complemented with interviews (artists, scientists, curators, critics).

Research results The results of the project, i.e. a theoretical understanding of the conditions of possibility of art disseminating genomics knowledge, and a critical understanding of practical strategies used in intersections of art and genomics to disseminate knowledge, will provide *The Arts and Genomics Center* with necessary conceptual and practical tools to attain its goals.