

Feasting the Lab and other projects

Art and science that skirts the limits of institutional frameworks

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ABSTRACT

Working as an artist in scientific laboratories means that I rely highly on institutional bureaucracies to support my artwork. As a result, my creative practices are highly regulated and institutionalized. Some of my most significant achievements as an artist and researcher in the bioart field are bureaucratic ones. Performances and text documents that are only ever read or seen by very small audiences – health and safety officers, grant administrators, park wardens, and ethics review boards. These administrative activities have become a central component of my artistic practice. I can feel these skills and actions inscribing themselves into my creative work, my thought processes, and inscribing my body with the logic of institutional systems. In this chapter, I will chart the reification of an unruly artist as she is transformed by the institutional processes, and she is subject to over fifteen years of working at the intersection of art and science. This trajectory culminates in an artwork where regulatory skirting becomes the subject of the artwork itself. *Feasting the Lab* (2018) was a cabaret staged in January 2018 in celebration of the opening of the new INCUBATOR bioart lab in the School of Creative Arts at the University of Windsor. For one night only, before the lab was certified, we did everything in the lab that would normally be prohibited in a scientific environment. This project manifests for viewers, the bureaucratic processes, and restrictions of human and non-human interactions in scientific institutional environments, and the extent to which artists can circumnavigate those limits through administrative gymnastic tactics.

22. Feasting the Lab and Other Projects: Art and Science that Skirts the Limits of Institutional Frameworks

Jennifer Willet

Sometimes it feels like surfing - riding up against the limits of institutional frameworks through radical interdisciplinary art and science practices. There are ecstatic moments where I am present and alive in an institutional space so restricted that I feel grateful to breath and participate in something so few will ever do or see. I have also experienced crushing amounts of paperwork; regulations so obscure you need specialized education to navigate them; and institutional hierarchies of power and unequal disciplinary valuation between the arts and sciences. Some of my most significant achievements as an artist and researcher in the bioart field are bureaucratic ones. Performances and text documents that are only ever read or seen by very small audiences; health and safety officers, grant administrators, park wardens, and ethics review boards. There is often a moment with each project where it seems that the whole affair might fail – that the show might *not* go on – that we as artists do not belong here. And then bureaucratic logic prevails. With one final compromise encapsulated in one final form - approval is granted. These administrative gymnastic tactics have become a central component of my artistic practice. And though I like to imagine myself as the scrappy artist who out maneuvers the logic of academic and scientific institutions as a catalyst for transformation, I can feel the years of accrued administrative tasks inscribing themselves into my creative work, my thought processes, and inscribing my body with the logic of institutional systems. In this paper, I will chart some of my experiences as an artist working in highly institutionalized spaces and the push-and-pull of attempting to transform institutional regimes while subject to, and serving as an officer of, the very institution I am attempting to transform.

“Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like

braille.” (Winterson, 1993.) Jeannette Winterson’s metaphorical description of text inscribed, and uninscribed, and inscribed again on the human body communicates aptly some of the corporeal sensations I have experienced as I ecrú life’s circumstances. The story written on *my* body is the tale of an artist / lover / mother / provocateur and a successful bureaucrat whose layered, compulsive, administrative activities have shaped – even marred – their body and their psyche through endless repetitive professional activities. I want to recall some of the progressive impressions made on my corporeal self through the re-telling of a series of tactical human / institution interactions I have engaged in over 20 years working in the art / science milieu. Much like Lisa Steele’s video work ‘Birthday suit with scars and defects’ (1974), I will recount for the reader a prolonged list and meditation on the various artistic / bureaucratic scenarios I have participated in and trace the impact those actions had on my artistic practice, my station within institutional hierarchies, my consciousness and my body.

I started working as an artist in laboratory environments in 1996. I was an undergraduate student at the University of Calgary, and my future BIOTEKNICA collaborator Shawn Bailey¹ and I negotiated our way into visiting the Human Anatomy Lab in the School of Medicine. We argued that as students looking to improve our figure drawing skills we needed to better understand the structures of the human body hidden under the flesh. It was astonishing to me that through a series of meetings and requests we could maneuver ourselves as artists into a highly restricted scientific environment. I was hooked immediately. We returned many times to the dank yellow room in the basement of Foothills Hospital, to study human anatomy directly from the source. (Fig.1) As we built trust with the staff, we were given greater and

¹ Now known as Jason Knight.

greater access to human corpses, preserved body parts, and medical students. These experiences did improve my drawing skills. But more importantly, and more honestly, I wanted to understand death better – I wanted to see a deceased human body up close – I wanted to draw it, to study it, to meditate on it – to write about it – to know it. And through this experience I gained a valuable corporeal knowledge of the nature of a deceased human body, a knowledge that I still carry with me today.

This experience taught me a few things about working as an artist in highly institutionalized spaces:

- 1) Artistic education and research is not understood or valued in the same way as scientific education and research in our society. Sometimes you will have to educate those from other disciplines about what you are doing and why it is important. Sometimes it is easier and more effective to not tell everyone exactly what you are up too.
- 2) Different disciplines have different community standards: learn the language and standards of the cross-disciplinary community you want to participate in.
- 3) Institutions rely on a form professionalism including moderate dress, good communication skills, and effective paperwork skills. It will improve your chances of moving smoothly through institutional spaces if you adhere to these norms.
- 4) Be respectful to people, communities and institutions that differ from your own. You will learn a lot, and make new friends and colleagues in unlikely places.
- 5) It is often a good idea to go places where you don't think you belong.

These notions were expanded while I worked under the umbrella of the BIOTEKNICA Collective (S. Bailey and J. Willet) in Montreal from 2000-2007. BIOTEKNICA was a fictitious bioengineering corporation that purportedly grew human teratoma tumors as a biotech product line. In 2004 and 2006 we traveled to Perth Australia to study mammalian tissue culture and tissue engineering protocols at SymbioticA Art and Science Collaborative Research laboratory at the University of Western Australia. During this time, Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr collaborated with us on the production of an artwork called BIOTEKNICA: Organic Tissue Prototypes (2006) a series of 3D teratoma shaped sculptures seeded with a P19 mouse teratoma cell line. (Fig.2) A project that had started as intensely critical of the complicated bioethics of the biotech sector, had shifted in its' positionality away from outsider critique towards a critical AND participatory relationship with biotechnology.

In this capacity, we understand our position to be like that of *double agents*. Not in the Cold War sense of the term, but rather as a participant with dual intentionalities. Here, we are welcomed into a highly specialized environment inaccessible to the general public. We are simultaneously engaging collaboratively, respectfully and excitedly with the individuals, protocols and institutional structures of the site – while at the same time, from a different standpoint, gaining outsider insight and observations (and criticisms) that are published in other communities. Often these roles are at odds – sometimes easily synchronized, but always co-present. (Willet, Bailey, 2006.)

With BIOTEKNICA, I recognised that my values and research objectives are not always in alignment with the institutions and individuals I work with in a cross-disciplinary environment. At that time, I chose not to communicate this miss-alignment of intentions and outcomes with the scientists working around me. I considered this strategy as similar to investigative journalism where collected information could contribute to science criticism in the form of artwork, public lectures, or academic texts.

During my time with BIOTEKNICA, I also became a skilled grant writer. I learned that I could use the cloud of bureaucracy surrounding the grant writing process to achieve goals well beyond my means. As very young artists we imagined ambitious projects on our kitchen floor. And like every tech start up today, we would create exciting image sets and dynamic websites to accompany each proposal giving professional currency to DIY research / creation activities. We were wildly successful. We created a creative / bureaucratic machine called BIOTEKNICA that garnered its' own organizational cache. However, through this process of faux institutionalization, we became more disgruntled and more institutionalized ourselves. The stress affiliated with this transformation contributed greatly to the end of BIOTEKNICA in 2007.

In the following years, I attempted various tactics to upend institutional forces infiltrating my space, time, body, and art practice. I began by performing unruly actions in laboratory environments for cameras and very small audiences of scientists, students, administrators, cleaning staff. I wanted to develop a performative vocabulary for non-scientists to subvert the institutional authority of the lab.

I am interested in propagating alternative models of biotechnology towards a wider representation of possible practitioners (artists, mothers, accountants, and swimmers), and a wider range of possible relations between the various orders of life that make up the laboratory ecology. If we apply these strategies biotechnology does not only have to be understood from the perspective of rationality and scientific method or from models established through business and industrialization. Biotechnology can also be perceived as an art form – as cooking - as poetry – as family – as cultivating and/or rearing – as sexuality - as care of the self/other. (Willet, 2008.)

I decided to perform laboratory actions naked, exposing the animality of the human researcher in the lab. I wanted to re-position lab work as an interspecies interaction, rather than an objective research methodology. I worked to develop a type of body language for a

naked female that did not conform to modeling or pornographic standards. One that refused to arch her back, point her toes, and break her body up into seductive angles. I wanted the images of my body to be read as a quirky human organism; a trickster, a fool, a person who chooses to not conform to institutional or representational rules. I have used various strategies to gain access to labs for artistic purposes including clandestine tactics and negotiated access.

I developed a collaborative photographic practice with Irish artist Kira O'Reilly, whom I met at SymbioticA in 2004. Over the years, we have met in several laboratories and engaged in unusual and poetic performative actions in highly restricted institutional spaces. Together we create photographic works exploring conversations between our artistic practices, and the interconnections we see between the human body and the laboratory ecology.

For our first collaborative photo shoot, I arranged for us to access a tissue culture lab that was in the process of being decommissioned at the University of Leiden in 2008. (Fig.3) This was a very exciting opportunity, as the decommissioning of a lab is a specific bureaucratic instance that changes the functionality and Health and Safety status of a room. One day the room is a lab; and the next day it is just a room again. Great artistic potential lies in this in-between moment. It was during this in-between time that we met with a photographer to perform tissue culture protocols in an unexpected fashion. We intentionally removed our shoes and clothing and climbed into one of the biosafety cabinets along with the cells to perform the protocol. We deliberately put ourselves in the position of the specimen. We contaminated the sterile cabinet with our bodies. Any working laboratory would not allow this action as it contravenes health and safety regulations, contaminates an expensive piece of equipment, and generally contradicts community standards for acceptable behaviour in laboratory environments.

I often think back to the logistics of that photoshoot as a perfect confluence of bureaucratic circumstances. I was working at the Art and Genomics centre (an international hub for bioart teaching and research directed by Dr. Robert Zwijnenberg), at the same time as a lab in the biology building was being decommissioned (a rare occurrence); in a country (The Netherlands) where nudity and the human body is not intrinsically understood as taboo. Only under these very specific circumstances would this photoshoot have been possible. The resulting photographs [*Untitled (Hamster Ovaries Protocol) series, 2008*] are transformative. They capture the strength and fragility of the human form performing feminist and unruly actions in a deeply hierarchical space. This work marks a significant instance of understanding and mobilizing bureaucratic logic towards artistic ends as a central component of my art practice.

Another good example of bureaucratic tactics in my art practice is a project called BioARTCAMP. In July 2011, I hosted 20 artists, scientists, and students in residency at The Banff Centre.² Participants worked to build a portable laboratory in the forest and conducted a variety of scientific, ecological, creative, and theoretical projects. BioARTCAMP was a social practice project where humans and non-human organisms (in the lab, in the kitchen, and in the forest) co-habituated in a field research station in Banff National Park, Canada. (Fig. 4) This project served to navigate contested boundaries between lab and field-based scientific methodologies and to topple discrete categorizations of life by bringing lab specimens and ‘natural’ life forms into physical and conceptual proximity. BioARTCAMP also functioned as a

² BioARTCAMP participants included: Iain Baxter (CAN) Marie-Pier Boucher (CAN) Zoot Derks (NL) Tagny Duff (CAN) Jeanette Groenendaal (NL) Kurt Illerbrun (CAN) Angus Leech (CAN) Marta De Menezes (PGL) Bulent Mutus (CAN) Jennifer Willet (CAN) Paul Vanouse (USA). Special guests included: Tokio Webster, Grant Yocom, Louise Baxter, Joan Linder, and Dylan Leech.

cautionary tale; engaging in advanced biotechnological protocols in the beautiful but conflicted site of Banff National Park marks past and present economic and colonial exploitations of human and non-human life on our terrestrial ecology. It could be argued that we are only repeating these corrupt strategies at microscopic and molecular levels with biotechnology today.

BioARTCAMP is the largest inter-institutional project I have completed in my career. Partners included: The University of Windsor, the Banff Centre, and Banff National Park; and eight other funders and partner organizations.³ Preparation took four years; applying for grants, negotiating with sponsors, applying for permits, seeking health and safety approvals, first aid training, negotiating inter-institutional agreements and artist / researcher agreements, arraigning for porta-potties, babysitters, and biohazardous waste pick up in the forest, etc. The most contentious aspect of preparing for BioARTCAMP was the collections permit I was seeking from Parks Canada to allow the artists to collect biological specimens within a national park. A variety of issues were flagged as roadblocks; all were manageable. However, there seemed to be a more general concern of whether or not it was acceptable to grant artists permits normally reserved for scientific and archaeological research. This question caused a rift in the Parks Canada staff members I was dealing with. In the end, I argued that given that my research was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada through a rigorous peer review process, it was legitimate research and should be given equal consideration. With some behind the scenes negotiations, upper administration approved my application against

³ SSHRC the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, The Ontario Arts Council, Hosting International, Parks Canada, Banff National Park, Glenbow Museum, The Art and Genomics Centre at The University of Leiden, and Fonds BKVB.

the wishes of some of the park staff I had been dealing with. This created an uncomfortable tension within the organization, and with numerous individuals. Though I had been successful in achieving my artistic / bureaucratic goals, and set an important precedent for research / creation activities taking place in our national parks system, I was uncomfortable with the stress I had caused for several Parks Canada employees in their workplace environment and by extension their social circles.

All this transpired before the project even began; we received the permit one day in advance of the event. With the arrivals of the artists, scientists, and students the tables were turned – my function within the project changed from provocative artist to arts administrator and implementer of the myriad of rules and complicated compromises I had agreed to abide. The project was a great success, but my experience of BioARTCAMP was mostly unpleasant. So unpleasant; I questioned my own research / creation methods working within large institutional spaces as possibly unethical. I experienced first-hand the stress that bureaucrats endure when artists push the limits of the institution that the bureaucrat is employed to uphold. It was an untenable position; one I had put many administrators through with my own artistic / bureaucratic tactics over the past decade. As a result, I took a hiatus from large collaborative projects for a number of years, though eventually returned to working as a curator and social practice artist with new strategies to avoid inflicting tremendous stress on myself, colleagues, students and collaborators.

In addition to the projects I have described thus far, I also work as an Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair in Art, Science and Ecology in the School of Creative Arts at the University of Windsor, Canada. In 2009, I opened the first bioart lab in Canada, a teaching and

research facility called INCUBATOR: Hybrid Laboratory at the Intersection of Art, Science and Ecology. In 2018, INCUBATOR Relocated to a custom-built biosafety level 2 bioart laboratory as part of the new downtown campus. (Fig. 5, 6) This hybrid laboratory / theatre facility supports advanced bioart research / creation and makes visible biotech protocols to audiences through a floor to ceiling glass wall separating the lab from a large public space. INCUBATOR Lab supports mixed use biotech research with integrated multimedia, lighting design, video and sound. INCUBATOR Lab provides unique innovations in bioart and biotechnology public engagement through (1) making daily bioart laboratory activities visible to the public; (2) serving as a gallery where artworks that are unable to leave the laboratory can be safely displayed; and (3) as a multimedia performing arts venue where seated audiences can view live performance events that integrate biotechnology into multimedia storytelling genres. In 2020, the University of Windsor will open a second bioart facility INCUBATOR Studio. This space is a storefront artist studio and (biosafety level one) lab to house my own creative production and host community bioart workshops.

In January 2018, I opened the new INCUBATOR Lab facility with a special event called Feasting the Lab where we feasted the new facility the way one might feast a new home or the arrival of a baby. (Fig. 7, 8, 9) In this instance, I was working to make the bureaucratic moment when a room becomes a lab a visible and joyous community event. My intention was one of marvel, and of critique. Marvel at the wonder of watching the human construction of a laboratory come into being with nothing but potential for future research. And institutional critique of the absurd complexity of the regulations that are designed to create safe and measurable research outcomes, but sometimes hinder the very activities they are designed to support. For one night

only, I invited the public to join me in engaging in all the activities within the new lab that would never again be possible once the lab was certified. We ate in the lab, danced barefoot in the lab, we consumed alcohol in the lab.

Feasting the Lab was attended by approx. 500 community members. Thyme Kitchen chef Julie Myers served science themed canapés, desserts in petri dishes, and a roasted pig head to guests. We brewed sangria in the lab. Theresa Sims from the Can-Am Indian Friendship Centre blessed the lab. DJ soul Brother Stef, soprano Dr. Jennifer Swanson, and the UWindsor Chamber Choir directed by Bruce Kotowich all gave live performances. Bioartist Marta De Menezes (PL) and theorist Dalilia Honorato (GR) donned outrageous costumes and served as bartenders and hosts in the lab, while Lisa Carrie Goldberg from Action Potential Lab (Toronto, CAN) ran squid ink printing workshops in the gallery. Windsor based artists Jude Abu Zaineh and Domenica Mediati exhibited bioart video works and the Students of the BioART: Contemporary Art and the Life Sciences class exhibited artworks and contributed a live performance.

I performed a character I call the 'gentleman scientist.' He serves as a ring master, as host, a Willi Wonka figure, and myself; dressed all in white with a top hat and a modified lab coat. The coat is very formal and filthy, stained with soil from the Banks of the Detroit River. It has a bustle, a high collar, and 8 oversized nipples or cupping devices (snow globes) filled with Nutrient Agar. I have developed a performance where as I go about my evening, the gentleman swabs people and items in his environment, unscrewing the bulbs one at a time to insert the collected microorganisms into the portable micro ecologies. Towards the end of the night, myself and Tina Suntres from the University of Windsor Research Safety Committee asked everyone to leave the lab, and announced from that moment forward these activities would no

longer be acceptable in this space, replaced instead by certified laboratory protocols. The party was over.

Feasting the Lab was designed to explore the limits of acceptable human behavior and interspecies interactions in a laboratory as defined by institutional regulatory bodies. With this project, I employed in a more direct tactic for navigating the various institutional regulations I was engaging critically with as an artist. I reached out to my colleagues across the university and I told everyone exactly what I was up to. Rather than a clandestine or adversarial model, I invited others to join me in performing gymnastic bureaucratic tactics towards making this unusual event possible. To my delight, this strategy enabled many beautiful conversations with other officers of the university who found themselves compromised working in a large institutional environment. In other instances, this information was of no interest to the individual I was dealing with and did not change the very stressful complications of asking an institution to participate in counterintuitive creative actions. As always, Feasting the Lab was a bit of a nail biter; sticking points included the fire permit, negotiations with internal food and beverage services, and controlling the light levels in a building still under construction. Clearly, as I have worked my way up academic hierarchies, my strategies for navigating institutional environments as an artist have changed. These days, I have far less fear of being asked to leave. I am more direct – polite and fun, but also more challenging in my interactions with other officers of the institution. I have more currency in institutional frameworks; but I also have more to lose. Possibly I have grown complacent to the hierarchies that provide me with the resources I desire. Possibly my position within institutional environments has changed from double agency - to *conflicted*. As if through a process of reification, the unruly artist working at the at periphery of institutional science has been transformed, subsumed, and

repositioned as an officer in the institutional framework she originally rallied against.

Sometimes this feels like a failure and sometimes a grand success. If nothing else, I have nudged the criteria for who can hold positions of power within laboratories and academic institutions. I am an artist and an unruly woman. I direct a feminist art / science laboratory with an emphasis on community engagement. I have created a type of institutional space that did not exist before; and I (and generations of art / science researchers before me) insist that artists do, in fact, belong here. Possibly more importantly, I look to help the next generation of unruly people who do not belong in laboratories and institutional spaces to join me in co-authoring more inclusive biotech futures.

The personal costs affiliated with organizational success and the ongoing deferral of my wellbeing to meet the demands of working as an artist within institutional frameworks are high. I have terrible posture. This was always the case, but as I carry more responsibility I feel institutional processes shaping my spine and neck towards atrophy. I can feel an institutional logic pervading my thoughts. My dreams are filled with institutional scenarios. My artistic imagination has been infected. When I began to work in this milieu two decades ago, I assumed that laboratory specimens required more of our bioethical consideration if we were to ever achieve a sustainable biotech future. I had overlooked the other organisms struggling for sustainability in labs; the human researchers who have to ignore their biological and social needs to contort themselves to meet the needs of the bureaucracy in which they are working.

If all of this is true, why do I keep coming back for more? Certainly, there is an element of ambition. Also, post-secondary institutions house the very large infrastructure I need to engage in a highly technologized art practice. However, my research / creation activities are primarily

driven by another compulsion I call 'the feeling.' I am compelled by the pursuit of the electric excitement of every cell in my body that I experience when I am deep in the caverns of human / technological spaces holding fragile lifeforms in my hand. Or when I am hosting an absurdist art / science event and things start happening that even I did not imagine. I have similar feelings when I am hiking in the mountains, standing in front of an outstanding painting, and watching our girls run in and out of the tide on a sandy beach. I experience a perceived aliveness – of myself – of the human project - of the unfurling universe – of love. I imagine this is what surfing must feel like. It comes while having an experience that I am both amazed by and grateful for. It is vulnerable and frightening and fleeting. I pursue it avidly. I am able to defer my pleasure for years in the pursuit of 'the feeling' completing hundreds of hours of meetings and paperwork, and budgets, and grant reports; all in the pursuit of a future ecstatic artistic moment.

And so, it continues the evolution of my performative bureaucratic tactics. Each past strategy for navigating institutional spaces as an artist, leave traces in my practice and my body, and in the institutions where those actions took place. The palimpsest is made, and made again. As my work evolves, I sense a momentum towards greater transparency. As I work to make laboratory practices, regulations, spaces more transparent, more connected to the local ecology and the local community; I am also working towards making my intentions and methods more transparent and connected to the local community within institutional an context. This shift in bureaucratic strategies is intended to reduce stress and strain on myself, and other bureaucrats, towards a more collaborative and empathy-based methodology for navigating extreme institutional environments.

Citations:

Steele, L. Birthday Suit with scars and defects. Video, b/w, sound. 1974. (11:00)

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