

## re: arts

## Making 'BioArt' a cultural practice

Verena Dauerer  
SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

At this year's Society for Social Studies Conference at the University of Tokyo, Aug. 25-29, there will be a session on "BioArt," which begs the question: What would that be?

BioArt describes the variety of art forms emerging in the last two decades that use biotechnology or genetics to manipulate living things, altering food, plants, even livestock. In best do-it-yourself tradition, artists have started to swap their studios for laboratories and are using molecular biology to deliberately create hybrids, clones or mutations as artistic expressions.

So is science the new art? A question posed by author Ingeborg Reichle in the newly published and thorough compendium about biotechnology and art "Art in the Age of Technoscience: Genetic Engineering, Robotics, and Artificial Life in Contemporary Art."

The influence of science and technology into the art realm is not actually new. In the early 20th century, Ukrainian painter Kasimir Malevich had already utilized bacteria for his Suprematist visualizations. In our increasingly tech-reliant civilization, however, mankind might now be forced to rethink the definition of "human" when facing scientific innovations such as cloning, bio warfare or genetically engineered designer babies.

Notably enthusiastic about the development of Bio Art are the artists, such as Brazilian Eduardo Kac. In 1999, for his biotech work "Genesis," he created a synthetic gene by translating a sentence from the Bible into Morse Code. He then incorporated the code into bacteria that, when exposed to ultraviolet light, started to mutate. A newer work of Kac is "Edunia," a genetically engineered flower that, as a hybrid of Kac himself and a petunia, expresses the artist's DNA through the flower's red veins.

At the recent art and technology Interferenze Festival at Vakant space in the Hara juku area of Tokyo, artistic duo BCL displayed other genetic flower manipulations. Tokyo-based Shihō Fukuhara and Austrian Georg Tremmel have been engaging in "biohacking." For their "Common Flowers" project, they



Something blue: "Common Flowers," a recent work of the creative duo BCL, Shihō Fukuhara and Georg Tremmel, involved the cloning of Suntory Flowers' genetically engineered "Moon dust" carnation using plant tissue culture techniques. They next plan to remove the blue carnation's foreign genes and return it to its original white state. GEORG TREMMEL

reverse engineered an already genetically engineered carnation. Suntory Flowers, a subsidiary of Japanese brewing company Suntory, genetically manipulated an originally white carnation into blue and sold it under the name Moon dust. As a response, BCL bought the blue flower and started to clone it, literally in their kitchen, using do-it-yourself biotech means. Afterward, they released their cloned flowers into nature in order to raise questions of intellectual property and copyright. The name "Common Flowers" relates to the Creative Commons open-source movement, which promotes

collaboration on and the sharing of texts and images, and BCL published a how-to-clone manual on their Web site.

Shihō Fukuhara of BCL explains, Suntory Flowers and the Moon dust carnation represent the first commercially available genetically engineered consumer product that is intended purely for aesthetic consumption: "The media outcry wasn't that huge since it was neither food nor developed from animals."

Fukuhara found it strange how relaxed the Japanese are about genetic engineering, the business behind it and the lack of a public dialogue about the topic.

"Creating genetically manipulated plants for merely aesthetic purposes is a nice marketing strategy from somebody who wants to introduce the genetic engineering industry without being regarded as irresponsible," Fukuhara says. "A product like flowers can slowly change our perception of genetically altered products. If it's nice and beautiful with 'Dream come true' as a tag line, who cares how it's made?"

By biohacking the blue carnation, BCL wants to raise awareness of a development in science that doesn't just concern flowers. Fukuhara explains, "As a cultural practice, we believe it is important to gain an understanding of biotechnology. As the 20th century was the century of the computer, the 21st century will be about biotechnology."

She compares the current state of biotechnology with the state of the computer industry in the 1960s and '70s, when only a handful of universities and companies could afford computer labs,

the equipment occupied large spaces and it was difficult to learn and understand. It was only when PCs became affordable did users begin to explore their potential playfully and start building their own. "We believe the same is happening to biotechnology now," she says.

BCL's process of cloning Suntory's blue flower doesn't sound that difficult. They buy the modified flowers and then bring them back to life using plant tissue culture techniques, a way of propagating plants in sterile conditions.

"Basically, once a flower is cut, it is slowly dying. With plant tissue culture, plants are grown on a growth medium with the necessary nutrition. If the flower is reasonably fresh it will start growing again. This is what we mean by 'reverse-engineering' the plant," says Fukuhara.

To do this, ordinary kitchen utensils and materials from drugstores and supermarkets are sufficient. For glassware, BCL use baby-food jars; their sterile room is an empty plastic box and the growth medium is made with agar agar and multivitamin tablets.

As a next step, BCL want to remove the foreign genes from the blue carnation and restore the plant to its original white color. If successful it would serve as a tactical statement, since they theoretically could also restore genetically altered rice, soy or corn. Shihō Fukuhara says, "We as citizens are not only consumers, we can actively participate in the biotech revolution."

The Society for Social Studies Conference, Aug. 25-29, is at the University of Tokyo, Komaba Campus, Meguro-ku. For more information, visit <http://4sonline.org>

## Who deserves to sit alongside Chagall?

C.B. Liddell  
SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

There are many ways to view the lush, colorful, dreamlike and apparently naive art of Marc Chagall, one of the undoubted greats of 20th-century painting. "Marc Chagall and the Russian Avant-garde, from the Collection of the Centre Pompidou" at The University Art Museum, Tokyo University of Arts, makes a brave attempt to set him within the context of his times, something that doesn't quite work with a painter who, more than most, unquestionably followed his own secret muse.

The exhibition, which is certainly impressive to look at, presents several other Russian avant-garde artists from the time: Natalia Goncharova, a primitivist who later turned to cubo-futurism; Mikhail Larionov, the originator of the seldom-appreciated Rayonist movement; and the abstract painter Vassily Kandinsky, who, as the paintings here display, was also a fairly good figurative artist. There are also a few excellent cubist-inspired sculptural works by the likes of Alexander Archipenko, Jacques Lipchitz and Ossip Zadkine, and an odd selection of what look like futuristic architecture models by that incurable avant-gardist Kasimir Malevich.

These are all people with whom Chagall was associated in various ways or who at least breathed the same early-20th-century air of revolutionary foment. But this aside, there is very little in common in artistic terms. Chagall's precursors were French symbolists such as Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon, while his closest artistic fellow travelers include the likes of Georges Rouault, Raoul Dufy and Paul Klee, painters who shared his artistic lyricism and love of color.

The artist with the best claim to sit alongside Chagall at this exhibition is Goncharova. Like Chagall, who continued to draw inspiration from his working-class Jewish background throughout his career, Goncharova's early primitivist works, such as "Les porteuses" ("The Porters," 1911), reflect themes of Russian daily life. But the big difference is that Goncharova's paintings of peasants lack emotion. Painted in hot, lurid colors with brush compositions, we get the sense that the painter is just striving for an effect.

Because of the evident mismatch between Chagall's paintings and the other painters on display, the best way to read this exhibition is as a contrast between Chagall's introspective emotionalism and the outward-looking avant-gardism represented by the other artists.

Avant-gardism's competitive group dynamics often led artists to lose touch with their inner muse and their public, and to focus instead on trying to outdo each other. An analogy can even be drawn with the sect-driven nature of revolutionary politics in this period, where the interests of the common people clearly came second to the ideological innovations, bickering and maneuvering engaged in by Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries, Anarchists, Trotskyists and Stalinists.



Marc Chagall © CENTRE POMPIDOU / MNAM / BIBLIOTHÈQUE KANDINSKY / ROSE ADLER

The exhibition unwittingly makes this point with its structure: sections one and two include Chagall's "Le pere" ("The Father," 1911) and "A la Russie, aux anes et aux autres" ("To Russia, Asses and Others," 1911). Evocative, emotional and visionary (in a non-political sense), these paintings are both fine examples of the style that Chagall developed as a young homesick painter in Paris, who was clearly listening to his own muse.

Section three of the exhibition, however, shows a different side. Titled "The Return to Russia," it shadows the period from 1914 to 1922, when Chagall returned home to marry his sweetheart, Bella, only to be trapped by the outbreak of World War I and caught up in the Russian Revolution and its aftermath. As an unwitting member of the avant-garde, Chagall was automatically seen as part of the new postrevolutionary cultural elite and he was offered the position of commissar of visual arts for the country, which he managed to refuse.

It was at this time that Chagall came into contact with most of the other artists in this exhibition, and the effect on his art does not appear to have been salutary. The examples on display show his work losing its flexibility and sense of emotional freedom. In "Paysage cubiste" ("Cubist Landscape," 1918-19) he even reverts to an arid and derivative cubist style.

It was only after he returned to Paris that his art started to flourish again, following the lines laid down during his first stay. One of the best works in the exhibition is "L'apparition de la famille de l'artiste" ("The Apparition of the Artist's Family," 1935). Driven by a deep nostalgia, mixed with love for Bella and perhaps a little guilt about abandoning his roots, he developed his trademark style, a Surrealist but sentimental amalgam of iconography from Russia and Paris wrapped together in warm, dreamlike colors.

N.B. The English titles in this article are not official translations.

"Marc Chagall et l'avant-garde russe dans les collections du Centre Pompidou" ("Marc Chagall and the Russian Avant-garde, from the Collection of the Centre Pompidou") at The University Art Museum, Tokyo University of the Arts, runs till Oct. 11; admission ¥1,500; open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tue.-Sun. (till 8 p.m. on Fri. from Aug. 1-31), closed Mon. and Aug. 21. For more information, visit [www.geidai.ac.jp/museum/exhibit/current\\_exhibitions\\_en.htm](http://www.geidai.ac.jp/museum/exhibit/current_exhibitions_en.htm)



"Common Flowers": BCL's cloned carnations are displayed at the Interferenze Festival at Vakant space in Harajuku. WWW.COMMON-FLOWERS.ORG

## Bringing samurai spirit and business acumen to kabuki

Rei Sasaguchi  
SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

On July 1, 2009, Kenzaburo Mogi, 72, a former vice chairman of the soy sauce manufacturing giant Kikkoman Corporation, was appointed to direct the Japan Arts Council, which covers all traditional performing arts of Japan, including noh, kabuki and bunraku (puppet theater).

A soy sauce executive might seem an odd choice to oversee Japan's traditional theater. But Itaru Takashio, the deputy commissioner of the Agency for Cultural Affairs and his colleague, Yayoi Komatsu, director of the Policy Planning and Coordination Division, had good reasons for asking Mogi to join the Japan Arts Council.

Mogi is a member of the Mogi clan in Noda, Chiba Prefecture, which has historical ties to the samurai Maki Genbanokami Yorinori. Yorinori served Toyotomi Hideyoshi's heir Hideyori, and who perished with Hideyori in the battle at the Osaka Castle in the summer of 1615. Mogi specialized in economics at Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo, and after graduating in 1960 he started working for the Bank of Tokyo. After only two years, however, he joined the Kikkoman Corporation (then called Noda Shoyu, Inc.), where, having an avid interest in English, he established a sales network for Kikkoman in the United States.

In 1971, Mogi went on to Harvard Business School and received an MBA in 1973. For the past few decades, he has been impressively active outside

Kikkoman, serving on some of the country's most important committees on economics and education. He has also held the directorship of such organizations as the Japan Management Association and the English-Speaking Union of Japan, and has been busy participating in group activities such as the Boston Association of Japan for which he served as chairman for two years from November 2000.

Mogi is clearly a very successful and sociable businessman, and his experience is pertinent to organizing the utilization this year's ¥9 billion budget allotted to the National Theater by the government. His plans to cultivate Japanese art and culture and promote their various forms abroad includes a personal desire to stimulate the imagination and interest of not only foreigners but also Japan's younger generations.

For this reason, Mogi was especially interested in June's performance of "Narukami" — one of the 18 kabuki plays that were popular in Edo (present-day Tokyo) during the 19th century — which was publicized as a "Kabuki Class" to attract and educate school children. The drama and elaborate set designs of "Narukami," featuring Kataoka Ainosuke, 38, in the lead role of Narukami, and Kataoka Takataro, 42, as princess Taema, who destroys Narukami with her charms, made it an ideal play to introduce kabuki to beginners. ("Narukami" was reviewed in The Japan Times on May 28.)

One of the most important projects Mogi now handles at the National Theater is the special program for aspiring kabuki



Kenzaburo Mogi

actors, which was initiated in 1970. Every two years, the program enrolls up to eight Japanese men between the ages of 15 and 23, who are interested in becoming either a *tachiyaku* (male lead) or an *onnagata* (female-role specialist) kabuki actors.

Unlike those actors born into kabuki's great acting dynasties, who are trained from childhood within their families, the National Theater's kabuki students follow an intensive curriculum that covers all the necessary basic training within just two years. In addition to the classes, the students must attend lectures by leading kabuki actors and prominent specialists.

The curriculum includes lessons in kabuki dance, *gidayu* and *nagauta* music,

the *shamisen* and percussion instruments, as well as instruction in *tachimawari* (fight-scene techniques) and acrobatics. Upon graduation, the young kabuki aspirants are sent, with the support of the Committee for the Preservation of Traditional Kabuki, to study under leading kabuki actors, from whom they receive their stage names. After a period of apprenticeship lasting 10 years or more, any of the young men can attempt the exam for the official status of *nadai* (qualified kabuki actor).

Over the past 40 years, the National Theater's program has produced 89 qualified performers, who make up 29 percent of today's active kabuki actors. The program's success owes much to the dedication of one man, Nakamura Matagoro, who died last year at age 94. Matagoro was involved with the course from its very inception, directing many of his students' summer kabuki plays. It is these performances that give young actors, who ordinarily are only offered minor parts, the opportunity to play important and leading roles on a main stage.

This year's Summer Kabuki Event, taking place from Aug. 20 to Aug. 23 at the National Theater's small auditorium, highlights Mogi's work at promoting kabuki to a younger generation. It includes the performances of 12 of the 89 Kabuki-training graduates, known as the Chigyo-no-kai ("The Society of Inexperienced Fish") and eight members of the Kabuki-kai, the group of young actors who have entered the profession by other routes.

## Twelve Chigyo-no-kai, eight Kabuki-kai and 47 ronin: Highlights of this summer's kabuki

The 16th Summer Kabuki Event, performed by members of the Chigyo-no-kai and Kabuki-kai, comprises Acts V, VI and VIII from "Kanadehon Chushingura" ("The 47 Loyal Retainers," also known as "The 47 Ronin"), based on one of three bunraku (puppet theater) masterworks written by Takeda Izumo and others in 1748.

The acts chosen are particularly moving because they refer to a philosophy that could be considered the root of Japanese culture.

Acts V and VI follow Hayano Kanpei, one of the 47 retainers who served Daimyo En'ya Hangan. After Hangan's death, Kanpei decides to live near the Yamazaki highway disguised as a hunter. One evening, he shoots and kills Ono Sadakuro, a ruffian who has robbed and killed an old man named Yoichibei. Yoichibei was carrying 50 *ryo* in coins from his daughter Okaru, who had sold herself to work in the

Gion pleasure quarters as a courtesan. After killing Sadakuro, Kanpei takes the 50 *ryo*, which he plans to use to seek revenge for Hangan's death, and leaves the scene.

Act VI closes with Kanpei's famous *hara-kiri* (ritual suicide) scene. He stabs himself with his dagger when he mistakenly thinks that he has killed Yoichibei, his own father-in-law. When it becomes clear that he has killed Sadakuro and not Yoichibei, Kanpei is allowed, in death, to join the group of 46 *ronin* who target their arch enemy Ko no Moron to avenge their master's death. Acts V and VI and the dance number from Act VIII are being performed under the direction of Onoe Kikugoro, one of today's leading kabuki actors, with Nakamura Tozo and Ichikawa Danzo assisting.

"Kanadehon Chushingura" runs twice daily at 11 a.m. and 5 p.m. from Aug. 20-23 at the small auditorium of the National Theater, 4-1 Hayabusa-cho, Chiyoda Ward; 12 min. walk from Nagata-cho Station (Namboku, Yurakucho and Hanzomon lines) and 7 min. walk from Hanzomon Station (Hanzomon Line). Tickets cost ¥3,500 and are available from the National Theater ticket center. Call (0570) 07-9900 or (03) 3230-3000, or visit <http://ticket.ntj.jac.go.jp>

## Next week

Our reviewers visit the Setouchi International Art Festival

**THE TOLMAN COLLECTION TOKYO, LTD.**  
2-2-18 Shiba Daimon, Minato-ku, 105  
Tel. (03) 3434-1300  
**MODERN JAPANESE PRINTS**  
Exclusive limited editions  
Internationally recognized artists  
Six days a week (Closed Tuesdays), 11 a.m.-7 p.m.