

MITCHELL / *the work of art in the age of biocybernetic reproduction*

Kac's work dramatizes the difficulty biocybernetic art has in making its object or model visible. In looking at the *Genesis* installation, or hearing about the synthetic rabbit, one takes it on faith that the work exists and is doing what it is reported to be doing. There is, in a very real sense, nothing to see in the work, only documents, gadgets, black boxes, and rumors of mutations and monsters. Perhaps this is the point, and Kac's work is best viewed in the context of conceptual art, which often renounces visual payoff. The object of mimesis here is really the invisibility of the genetic revolution, its inaccessibility to representation. The real subject matter, then, becomes the idea of the work and the critical debate that surrounds it as much as its material realization. In response to the predictable objection that the work is a kind of irresponsible "playing" with genetic technologies, Kac's equally predictable response is that purposeless play is at the heart of the aesthetic gesture as such.

A more pointed, simple, and direct use of conceptual art strategies is offered by Larry Miller's *Genomic License* project, which plays upon the patenting of animal and plant breeds by extending the notion of commodification and property rights to the personal genes of human beings. Miller copyrighted his own DNA in 1989, and has continued the project since then of distributing genetic copyright forms as, in his words, "a contribution to "Genesthetics," or art works that link art, science, theology, and capitalism. A related project is *The Creative Gene Harvest Archive*, part of an ongoing work by artists Karl S. Mihail and Tran T. Kim-Trang entitled *Gene Genies Worldwide Corporation*. This project, advertising itself as the "the cutting edge of art and genetic engineering," aims to compile an archive of the genes of "creative geniuses" in an attempt to improve the human species.

The blank irony and deadpan humor of these projects seems to leave any critical perspective to the spectator. One art project that stands out for its explicitly critical approach to biocybernetics is an internet-based artists' collective known as Rtmark. One of the most notable productions of this collective is *Biotaylorism 2000*, a half-hour automated PowerPoint presentation designed by Natalie Bookchin of Cal Arts. As a web-based entity, Rtmark presents itself as a new mutual fund designed to highlight the risks and opportunities of biotechnology corporate partnerships which are "scavenging the Third World and the interiors of bodies for valuable genes." Rtmark links the contemporary race to commodify the human genome with earlier state-sponsored programs in racial eugenics and the rationalization of industrial processes known as Taylorism, the subjection of every biological process to calculation and control. Bobbing and weaving between deadpan humor, feigned enthusiasm for the glorious profits to be made in biotech futures, and mordant historical reminders of the questionable past of biocybernetics, Rtmark has managed to insert itself into the corporate culture of biotechnology as a kind of resident virus. The collective has, on occasion, even been mistaken for a legitimate mutual fund, and has received invitations to trade shows and to private consulting sessions with biotechnology startups hungry for venture capital. Their proposals to make dazzling profits on world hunger and designer babies sound very attractive in a conversation riddled with optimistic projections about feeding the poor and improving the lives of everyone. Rtmark has also developed a