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Featured Artists + Projects

Tarsh Bates, Sebastian Befumo, Kate Campbell-Pope, Nic Compton, Maria Hildrick, Helen Smith, Jeremy Kirwan-Ward, Joshua Webb + Harrisdale Green

Our changing world, the impact of gallery closures, meet new Artsource CEO, Gavin Buckley + more



Biochange: Tarsh Bates

Tarsh Bates by Perdita Phillips

Tarsh's work puts up for discussion notions of ownership and control over animals and plants and wider questions about the role of technology in society.

Living things can be thought of as maintaining constant bodily conditions against an indifferent external environment. Homeostasis is this tendency to reach equilibrium, either within a cell or organism or socially within a group. For artists working with living biological material, providing stable conditions for the growth and maintenance of organisms is both a practical and ethical challenge. Bioartist Tarsh Bates has been exploring the aesthetics of caring for organisms in her mix of performance and installation works.

With a background including degrees in biotechnology and environmental science, it's not surprising that Tarsh has been keen to explore the crossovers between art and science. But the discipline of following the laboratory protocols necessary to grow monocultures of microorganisms hasn't precluded Tarsh from developing a critical and creative art practice.

In 2011 Tarsh undertook a major seven-month durational performance, *in vitro*, in two locations: starting at the SymbioticA art and science

laboratory at The University of Western Australia and finishing as a public residency at PICA. In the gallery, audiences were presented with eight glass vessels containing species commonly used in laboratory biology, varying from thrush (*Candida albicans*) to fruit flies (*Drosophila melanogaster*). The normally invisible lives of laboratory organisms were in evidence. Each species' colony required feeding, culturing and maintenance. Tarsh's life therefore became a performance combining her obligations to these non-human others, with her domestic duties of maintaining the ninth organism of the installation, herself (*Homo sapiens sapiens*).

The minimal installation in the gallery belied the multiple discussion points it generated. What started out with *objective* operating procedures, ended up questioning the *subjective* boundaries of humans and other: what is the nature of our selves and how do we take account of the autonomy of others? How do we envisage our relationships with non-furry – and indeed, distinctly unpleasant – organisms?


Bioart encompasses death and the risk of failure. If we have cared for organisms, how do we deal with their death? All the organisms that Tarsh has worked with have short lifespans. Even if care is sufficient during the life of the performance, the long-term issue of the death of the non-human participants cannot be avoided. Tarsh's work puts up for discussion notions of ownership



and control over animals and plants and wider questions about the role of technology in society. In this and other performance works, she critiques any unquestioning faith in biotechnology. Tarsh highlights the contrast between the cyclic time of maintenance, reproduction and the domestic, and an unravelling of progress seen in the ceaselessly mutable environment outside of the glass vessels.

Tarsh's work combines a craft of caring, with the humility of dealing with living change as subject matter. When asked what might be the ideal way to work, she favours setting up ambiguous conditions as a form of 'gentle estrangement' that lead people to question their own values and assumptions.

"Change is the point of my work. The aesthetics of biological art is the aesthetics of change. No single perfect moment exists – no universal truth. Every moment is different and unpredictable. Control is impossible. This is both exhilarating and frustrating."

Tarsh is currently engaged in a PhD exploring the performativity of care with European honeybees. 

Perdita Phillips is a contemporary artist interested in environmental issues and the nonhuman world. She is currently working towards an exhibition about waste, wastelands and cyclonic change at Spectrum Project Space in February 2013.

← Tarsh Bates, labwork01. Image courtesy of the artist
 ↗ Tarsh Bates, *In Vitro feeding Daphnia*, part of the *in vitro* project 2011. Image: Megan Schlipalius