

Case 10

GFP Bunny is an artwork from the year 2000 by Eduardo Kac (pronounced “cats”). “GFP” stands for Green Fluorescent Protein. The protein occurs in certain jellyfish and can be inserted into mammalian genomes. Kac collaborated with scientists in France to insert the protein in a rabbit, who he and his family named Alba.

The work of art called “GFP Bunny” centers around Alba, but also includes the public dialogue surrounding Alba and Kac (so Ethics Bowl is now part of the artwork!). GFP Bunny (the artwork) also includes the life and well-being of Alba: “what is important is the completely integrated process of creating the bunny, bringing her to society at large, and providing her with a loving, caring, and nurturing environment in which she can grow safe and healthy.”

Kac is not the first to use an animal in a work of art. GFP Bunny is so striking, however, because of the way that it combines art and bioengineering. Kac says that transgenic art “must be done with great care, with acknowledgment of the complex issues thus raised and, above all, with a commitment to respect, nurture, and love the life thus created.” Nor is Kac the first to intervene with the evolution of the rabbit. Rabbits, after all, as Kac notes, were originally only wild animals. They have since been domesticated and selectively bred to create new species. In fact, Alba is an albino, a species that does not occur in the wild and stands little chance of surviving there.

Kac takes pains to emphasize his deep respect for life in general and for Alba specifically. “Transgenic art must promote awareness of and respect for the spiritual (mental) life of the transgenic animal. The word ‘aesthetics’ in the context of transgenic art must be understood to mean that creation, socialization, and domestic integration are a single process. The question is not to make the bunny meet specific requirements or whims, but to enjoy her company as an individual (all bunnies are different), appreciated for her own intrinsic virtues, in dialogical interaction.” He also emphasizes the fact that creating Alba was not risky: her creation used existing technologies, and the protein is not harmful to rabbits. (<http://www.ekac.org/gfpbunny.html#gfpbunnyanchor>)

Critics of Kac contend that “there is no way to know, they say, whether the animal is suffering, or what effect the mutant bunny would have on the ecosystem if she were to escape and reproduce.” (<http://www.ekac.org/bostong.html>)

Yet others note “But art based on genetic engineering could set a dangerous precedent regarding what kind of genetic research is acceptable.” (<http://www.ekac.org/chitrib.html>)

Some medical ethicists have called Kac “irresponsible.” One art critic states, “The purity of your intentions doesn't matter. Creating An Animal In Service of Art sure looks reckless and mean and will be used by reckless and mean people. Your art is a silent endorsement for countless others who will Do It For All The Worst Reasons.”

(http://www.viewingspace.com/genetics_culture/pages_genetics_culture/gc_w03/hoyt_alba_response.htm)

Kac sees all perspectives on his work, including disagreement, as important and significant socially: he speaks of his “concerted effort to remain truly open to the participant's choices and behaviors, to give up a substantial portion of control over the experience of the work, to accept the experience as-it-happens as a transformative field of possibilities, to learn from it, to grow with it, to be transformed along the way.”

(<http://www.ekac.org/gfpbunny.html#gfpbunnyanchor>)

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