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EXPLORING THE COMPLEXITIES OF BIOART

THINK PIECE

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TEXT GLYPH

FOLLOWING ON FROM HIS GUIDE TO BIOHACKING, KENYAN-BORN, CANADA-BASED BODYBUILDER TURNED BIOHACKER GLYPH, ONE HALF OF INSTAGRAM DUO @BIOHACKINFO, NOW TURNS HIS ATTENTION TO BIOART

A former bodybuilder, Glyph has always been fascinated by the concept of human enhancement. But it wasn't until he moved to Canada where he met CyphR – a biochemistry undergrad, who at the time of meeting had already performed several implantation procedures on himself (he has one RFID chip implant that he uses to start his car, lock and unlock his phone, and another one in which he stores the private keys to his cryptocurrency wallets) – that he was able to pursue this interest in a meaningful way. Since then, the pair have worked on numerous groundbreaking projects all in the name of human enhancement, with Glyph more often than not acting as CyphR's test subject. Earlier this year, they decided to introduce their underground exploits to the mainstream by setting up their own [Instagram](#), while a website is soon to follow, acting as a space where amateurs and enthusiasts can come for guides on how to biohack and set up your own home lab, as well as tips on DIY body modification, implantation procedures, and gene editing. Following on from his [guide to biohacking](#), here Glyph turns his attention to bioart.

Exploring the complexities
of Bioart

7 IMAGES



Whether it's scientists using bacteria to recreate famous works of art, or artists using their bodies as experimental canvases to re-contextualize human biology, bioart is revolutionising how the public interacts with science, while laying the groundwork for the democratisation of personal self-expression.

Defined as the use of living systems and biological material through biotechnology to create art, the term 'BioArt' was first used in 1997 when artist Eduardo Kac implanted himself with a microchip on live television; a prophetic precursor to biohackers today who livestream their gene editing self-experiments. It is this convergence between art and science, between bioart and biohacking, where the artist and the hacker have opened up something as intellectually intimidating as biotechnology to the public domain, which sets bioart apart from other forms of contemporary art.

This union has even had a cultural impact on both fields. Take performance artist Stelarc who challenged the scientism of body functions and made a statement on biological fundamentalism by surgically implanting an ear into his arm. His works of bioart that include performing with a mechanical "third hand" have been credited with ushering in the entire grinder-biohacking subculture of DIY-cyborgs. While for the field of bioart, its inclusion into the open science community despite being an art and not a "science", has evolved it from merely a contemporary art moment in its scribble stage to an established and provocative art form.



The relationship between bioart and biohacking gets even more interesting when one moves from Stelarc's body augmentation through technology, and into do-it-yourself biology. DIY-bio is not only spawning other forms of bioart, but it has also been providing a lifeline to bioart. Biohacker community labs are accessible to the layperson and so they tend to be the go-to spaces for bioartists to create their works, given the limited accessibility of traditional science institutions.

"For me the body is an impersonal, evolutionary, objective structure," Stelarc once said, partially explaining the ethos of bioartists who use their bodies as mediums of art despite the inherent risks. He is now even working with biohackers to have an internet-connected microphone implanted into his ear-on-arm implant, despite an infection causing him to remove the microphone he had initially implanted during his first surgery.

The apparent risks with Stelarc's body-augmentation bioart are nonetheless mitigated by how the symbiosis bioart has with biohacking emancipates both from the misconceptions society has about them, and the hindrance to progress such misconceptions afford them. Because where it can be argued that biohacking reduces life to simple machinery with hack-able codes, bioart elevates life into an aesthetic using the very same impersonal tools of biotechnology that biohackers use. And the more the biohacking movement grows, the more bioart lends itself as a genuine, non-knee jerk cultural scrutiny of a seemingly approaching post-human society where genetic engineering, human enhancement and designer babies are the norm. Bioethicists, the very people who scrutinize the moral implications of biological sciences and therefore become the arbiters of what is right and wrong, appear to be the exact opposite when compared to bioartists. Who needs bioethics when you have bioart.

BIOART SEEMS TO BE AN ALMOST FRANKENSTEINIAN YET PROMETHEAN REMEDY TO THIS" – GLYPH

The discourse bioart generates cannot only render bioethicists obsolete, but it can also be a more organic, multi-faceted form of science communication because bioart compels the audience to engage with the science of the art they are presented with, sometimes at a deep cathartic level. And given the interdisciplinary communication that has to happen between a scientist and an artist when both parties are creating a work of bioart (despite both of them having no backgrounds in the other party's discipline) a form of organic scientific literacy that will make both the art and science translatable is guaranteed. This is the evolution of the public's engagement with science that bioart has the potential to birth. The other side of bioart, of democratizing self-expression, is even more crucial, and already unfolding.

Everyone, even through simple personal grooming, is a bioartist to an extent. Make-up, hairstyling; there is a science to it all — a sometimes rigorous process that has to be followed, many times using specific tools, to generate a certain result, a specific image. But the end goal is usually to create a perception, an impression, an art. Indeed, the image one presents to the world can involve many elaborate forms of bioartistry — whether through cosmetic tinkering or socio-behavioural modification; so much so that the latter can even modify one's gene expression. Bioart fosters a self-awareness of this, and when there is a convergence with biohacking, this self-awareness can become self-empowerment, with the individual almost able to construct and deconstruct their biology, almost able to artistically express their self-actualized Self, unhindered by biology. And so just like biohacking democratizes biotechnology, this unfolding hybridization of bioart and biohacking will democratize self-expression. Thanks to bioart, notions of biological fundamentalism will not limit self-expression.

Bio-art, bio-hacking, bio-technology; all this can seem like a lot of bio-hyphenation, but it says a lot about what is happening: Human biology has a new context, and "bio" or Life, is reaffirming itself on culture, values and technology. In a time when many point to technology as an alienating force that contributes to cultural devaluation and artistic decline, in a time of commercialized post-modernity that is devoid of aesthetics, bioart seems to be an almost Frankensteinian yet Promethean remedy to this. For artists set the tone of a culture, and with a do-it-yourself culture of biohacking becoming their participation in the approaching biotech revolution, maybe the future can be aesthetically emancipated, *despite technology*. Maybe we could even see a more democratic, more inclusive reincarnation of the 'Renaissance Man' as a result of this free-fusion of art and science; a 'Neo-Renaissance Post-Human' for the coming biotechnological revolution? Maybe.