

The background of the entire page is a close-up photograph of water ripples, showing concentric circles and soft, undulating patterns in shades of light blue and white. The text is overlaid on this background.

THE BODY IS A BIG PLACE

PETA CLANCY & HELEN PYNOR



Image Credits: Video production still: Chris Hamilton.

Langendorff heart perfusion image: Peta Clancy and Helen Pynor.

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Sound: Gail Priest

Video Production: Videographer - Pete West; Director of Photography - Rob Hunter;

Stills Photographer (underwater) - Chris Hamilton; Stills Photographer (above water) - Jessie Imam; Gaffer - Peter Ryan; Best Boy - Janek Szalc; Editor - Peter Barton, The Editors; Colourist - Trish Cahill; Performers - Adrian Brown, Stuart Campbell, Tracy Campbell, Peter Miller, Felicity Nolan, Mill Repse, Glen Teague; Stand-by Performers - Shirley Aisbett, Jan Coates, Nigel Goldsworthy, Sean Kavanagh, Penny Repse; Rehearsal Performers - Kevin Green, Amy Stevens, John Stevens, Tamaryn Stevens; Transplant Australia Delegate/Performer Recruitment - Karen Knuckey; Stand-by Props and Wardrobe - Anna Bardas, Natasha Johns-Messenger, Victoria Holessis, Ashlee Hope, Rachael Imam, Diana Popovska; Support Crew for Performers - Bronwyn Banfield, Janine Brown, Roxanne de Cata-Kavanagh, Karen Knuckey, Karen Miller, Penny Repse, Katrina Repse; Pre-production Lighting Advice - Matthew Stanton.

Shot on location at Melbourne City Baths.

Langendorff heart perfusion system: Collaborating Scientists - Professor John Headrick and Dr Jason Peart, Griffith University, Queensland

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ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

BEC DEAN

In my first experience curating biological art, I assisted the collective SymbioticA and their invited artists, including André Brodyk and Adam Zaretsky with the international survey exhibition *Biofeel: Art and Biology* at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art in 2002. The project included such exhibits as living tissue ‘worry dolls’ and famously a semi-living artist that continually made drawings via remote neurological stimulation.¹ In the decade following this major group exhibition, through the proliferation of science and art crossovers and collaborations within Australian galleries, I have witnessed a deepening of artist engagement with science and its affects and influences beyond the futuristic and speculative, on lives and on communities. Biologically engaged art practices have – for want of a better analogy – escaped the petri dish and permeated aspects of everyday life and culture. Like much contemporary art practice that has emerged in this early part of the 21st century, these modes of practice take an empathic rather than ironic or oppositional stance in relation to their subjects.² This collaborative work by Peta Clancy and Helen Pynor is research based, and as such it has begun with science, medicine, cultural theory, ontology and phenomenology, extended to the laboratory, involved community, and will end with public and personal conversations and performative actions around an exhibition.

The Body is a Big Place symbolically and practically explores the multitude of experiences and discourse around human organ transplant surgery. The gruesome history of medical innovation enjoys popularity with general audiences through the plethora of science television series that are produced on the subject, and we occasionally see the emotional aspects of organ donation explored in documentaries on the subject. However more perplexing questions about the nature of personal identity in cases of organ donation, especially in the case of organs like the heart, are rarely explored. Indeed, one’s feelings about organ donation are considered so private and little-discussed in Australia that at this moment, the federal government is televising a campaign to encourage family members to understand one another’s wishes in case they would have to authorise the surgical harvesting of their loved-ones organs.³ Clancy and Pynor explore this chasm between public knowledge and individual subjectivity by

1 *BioFeel* was an exhibition held at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts as a part of the Biennale of Electronic Arts Perth (BEAP) in 2002. The living tissue *Worry Dolls* were made by SymbioticA, and *MEART* was the title of the semi-living artist by Philip Gamblen and Guy Ben-Ary.

2 One of the projects that has influenced the artists in the research of this work is *Transplant* by Tim Wainwright and John Wynne who were artists in residence at Harefield Trust Hospital in London for a year over 2007. The project includes interviews, sound, and portrait and documentary photography.

3 www.donatelife.gov.au. The campaign slogan is “To donate life, know their wishes. OK?”

creating a metaphoric yet visceral space in which to consider the broader implications of transplant surgery and the potential for the biological interconnectedness of once distinct human beings.

In the development of this exhibition, Clancy and Pynor gathered together a network of people that have somehow been drawn into the process of offering organs for transplant surgery, either as family members of recipients or donors, living donors, doctors and medical professionals and recipients themselves. The title *The Body is a Big Place* alludes not only to the extended circle of people (of bodies living and deceased) that are drawn into this transplant community, but to the interchangeability of organs and biological material across space and time. The video work that has resulted from this process invokes the essential elements of an active living being – oxygen, fluid, brain function, mobility and a heartbeat. The heart as a symbol of life and the romanticised centre of emotion is also offered in the exhibition's installation, although what constitutes medical life and death in Australia at least, is now pronounced through the activity of the brain and central nervous system rather than the heart and its pulmonary mechanism. The artists' use of a heart perfusion system known as the Langendorff technique within the exhibition, reaches back to an earlier moment in the history of organ transplant surgery, pointing to its more experimental beginnings.⁴ With the collaboration of scientists, the artists will use this technique to attempt to bring two pig hearts – purchased directly from an abattoir as a commercial meat byproduct – temporarily back to a beating and semi-functioning condition. This can be seen as metaphoric gesture and 'enactment' of aspects of the transplant process itself.⁵

What the history of medicine demonstrates is that many of the ethical positions and morals we have developed around the science of medicine were tested on exactly the same grounds as experimentation itself. In this case, the Langendorff perfusion system was invented by Oskar Langendorff in 1895 and other perfusion techniques were further developed and refined by French scientist Dr. Alexis Carrel and American engineer and aviator Charles Lindbergh in the 1930s. At the same time that Carrel was lauded for his work on vascular anastomosis and other experimental surgeries which paved the way for the transplants, grafts and bypass surgeries now commonly performed, he was also lambasted by animal rights activists for acts of unnecessary cruelty. Lindbergh is most famously remembered as a heroic long-distance pilot, and notoriously for his subscription to theories on eugenics and racial superiority championed by 20th Century fascist states – a position that was influenced by his time working with Carrel.⁶

While *The Body is a Big Place* looks beyond the more obvious ethical issues surrounding the foundations of transplant surgery, by referencing the Langendorff technique it invokes this historical presence within the continuum of practice and research. One of the things that *The Body is a Big Place* does not attempt to do as a research-based work, is to tell the stories of others or to emulate individual patient

⁴ The use of the technique within the exhibition has been made possible through the collaboration of scientists Professor John Headrick and Dr Jason Peart from Griffith University in Queensland who are among a small number of scientists in Australia that have practiced this technique.

⁵ For the heart perfusion process, the artists travel 1.5 hours each way to an abattoir in Picton, NSW that processes pigs for human consumption on Monday each week. The hearts are harvested from animals that are destined for the supermarket shelf, and are not killed for the purpose of the work.

⁶ Friedman, David M. *The Immortalists: Charles Lindbergh, Dr. Alexis Carrel, and Their Daring Quest to Live Forever*, Chapter 1, "I Will Show You What I'm Doing Here" 2009, Harper Collins e-book.

experience anthropologically. This is not to say that this research wasn't gathered, but there are no biographies or medical case studies available in the context of the exhibition. Rather the artists have worked with members of the transplant community by collectively making an (quite literally) immersive video sequence of a range of humans sharing the same fluid space with one another. This space is represented as a peculiarly social zone – like a waiting room – that becomes untenable, impossible to inhabit from breath to breath. It is a space that all participants cannot share constantly although efforts are continually made to return to the circle of chairs at the bottom of a deep pool of water. In this sense the work goes some way to expressing the complexity of personal and emotional relationships within the transplant network, where relationships are usually anonymous and where, even without anonymity, reciprocation would be an impossibility.⁷ There is awareness of the presence of others, but contact is limited at the same time as the protagonists are intimately and viscerally connected.

The artists create in their video and sculptural installation a threshold space that reflects in some ways what anthropologist Lesley A. Sharp describes as “the peculiarly liminal” nature of donors as “caught somewhere between patient and cadaver status” and furthermore the elaborate symbolic transformation of donors as “simultaneously inert yet life-giving”.⁸ In film and television, popular cultural expressions of organ transplantation evoke the kind of fears that allay a total public acceptance of donation as a necessary, crucial life-preserving gift – from donor eyes that witness Death approaching its victims, a man who starts a relationship with a brain in a jar, to the classic tale of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.⁹ But they also elucidate in a melodramatic way, the hope that can spring between donor kin and organ recipients – that somehow the life-giving organ that is offered to a recipient also extends the life of the donor into the future.

The Body is a Big Place creates a space in which it is possible to imagine the phenomenological and emotional breadth of experience inherent in organ transplantation, from the intertwined perspectives of donors, recipients, family members, medical practitioners and scientists. It presents an uncomfortable duality, where as viewers and listeners, we breathe easily while watching a shared struggle for breath by everyday-seeming people. As its title suggests, the project lays open a place in which the bigness of these issues can be evoked and aired to a public audience, where one can invite uneasy thoughts of endings and beginnings – from the giant question of human mortality, to the intimate choice one can make in prolonging the lives of others – into the room.

7 The artists have interviewed recipients, living donors, and loved ones of donors for their perspectives and experiences of transplant surgery. Feedback often refers to the deep yet still anonymous connections that the transplant network experience – sometimes taking the form of letter writing – without ever knowing the full name or specific location of the donor/recipient.

8 Sharp, L.A., *Strange Harvest: Organ Transplants, Denatured Bodies, and the Transformed Self*, 2006, University of California Press Ltd, London, page 40.

9 Oxide Pang Chun, Danny Pang (dir.) (2002) *The Eye (Gin gwai)*, Palm Pictures, Hong Kong. Carl Reiner (dir) *The Man With Two Brains* (1983), Warner Brothers Pictures, USA. Kenneth Branagh (dir) (1994) *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, TrisStar Pictures, USA.

BIOGRAPHIES

PETA CLANCY

Peta Clancy completed a degree in Fine Art at RMIT and more recently a PhD in Fine Art at Monash University in Melbourne. For many years she has examined the intersection of art, biology and medical practices and processes through her art practice. Her artwork has been exhibited widely in Australia as well as internationally in the United Kingdom, the United States, Austria and China, including in the exhibition *Imagining the Everyday (20 Australian Photomedia Artists)* at the 2010 Pingyao International Photography Festival. She has been artist in residence at the Australia Council London Studio; the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, Melbourne; the Lung Transplant Service, the Alfred Hospital, Melbourne; SymbioticA, The University of Western Australia, Perth; Performance Space; and Sydney College of the Arts. She has been awarded grants from the Australia Council for the Arts, Arts Victoria and the Ian Potter Cultural Trust. Writings about her work have been published in *Look! Contemporary Australian Photography Since 1980* by Anne Marsh and *Art in the Age of Technoscience Genetic Engineering, Robotics, and Artificial Life in Contemporary Art* by Ingeborg Reichle, as well as in journals including *Photofile*, *Australian Art Collector*, *Cosmos*, *Eyeline Contemporary Visual Arts*, *Like*, and *Microbiology Today* (UK). Clancy is a lecturer in the Department of Fine Arts in the Faculty of Art & Design, Monash University.

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HELEN PYNOR

Helen Pynor has completed a Bachelor of Science majoring in cell and molecular biology, a Bachelor of Visual Arts majoring in sculpture, installation and photography, and more recently a PhD at Sydney College of the Arts. Pynor has exhibited widely in Australia, Europe and Asia, most recently in solo exhibitions at GV Art, London and The Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, and group exhibitions at The Powerhouse Museum, Sydney; Hazelhurst Regional Gallery, Sydney; and Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne. She has undertaken residencies at the Australia Council London Studio; Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris; A.R.T. Tokyo; SymbioticA, The University of Western Australia, Perth; Monash University, Melbourne; Sydney College of the Arts; Adolescent Medical Unit, The Children's Hospital at Westmead, Sydney; and Performance Space. Pynor was the recipient of the RBS Emerging Artist Award (2009) and The Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Photography Award (jointly 2008). She has been awarded grants from the Australia Council's Visual Arts and Inter-Arts Boards. Pynor's work has appeared in publications including *The British Medical Journal*, *New Scientist*, *Photofile*, *Australian Art Collector*, *The Australian* and *The Guardian online*. Works are held in collections of The University of Sydney, The Royal Bank of Scotland, Macquarie Bank, Artbank, Gold Coast City Art Gallery, and numerous private collections in Australia, Europe and Asia.

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