

Laboratory Ecologies

Jennifer Willet

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Laboratory Ecologies:

Science, art, fiction and the hybrid in the work of Jennifer Willet

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...But the possibility of an ecology of practices requires [the] abandonment of the opposition between "faithful description" and "fiction", between "fact" and "value", and for an ... approach that affirms the possible, that actively resists the plausible and the probable targeted by approaches that claim to be neutral...

(Stengers 2010, p. 57)

In *Laboratory Ecologies*, two mirrored images of a taxidermy deer welcome the visitor. They look somewhat misplaced and odd, since they are located right above a –similarly mirrored– image of a laboratory. However, if you ever happen to visit the Incubator Lab, Jennifer Willet's interdisciplinary lab/performance space, you will be greeted by that very (this time real) taxidermy deer. Similarly, the lab contains sophisticated microscopes sitting right next to toy microscopes, and cheap portable microscopes; in a corner, a mysterious green fluid bubbles... The Incubator Lab is unlike any traditional laboratory. It is like setting foot into a world where unexpected things may happen. Objects in this world don't look the way they usually do (or should): while it is obviously uncommon to find a taxidermy deer head in a lab, the above instruments, are not supposed to sit side by side since they conventionally belong to the separate realms of work and play. But there, they are not subject to any disciplinary or professional hierarchy. And why should they? After all, they are all functional instruments, just serving different purposes. If considered from this perspective, they all possess an infinite range of potentials.



The same can be said about the objects exhibited in *Laboratory Ecologies*. Featuring a combination of odd parts, they mix elements of the natural world (such as sheep skin) and the world of the artificial and human-made, lab-made items and items that can be found in the wild. For instance, an incubator living in a sheep sculpture, a bike-hauled organ containing an algae incubator/agitator, a tiny polar bear carrying lab equipment, or a microscope planted in a tent, the latter also filled with artifacts from the natural and artificial kingdom, forming a multicolor ecology of plastic, fabric, glass, and of course, visible and microscopic organisms. Despite their incongruity as objects that are neither just sculptural nor just functional, neither merely artistic nor predominantly scientific, these hybrid “creatures” are actually both: they are incubators, mobile labs etc., but they are also fabulous assemblages, and pastiches of different artistic genres. Importantly, they seem to form some eclectic as much as unexpected ecologies, not because they are completely imaginary, but because we are unaccustomed to thinking of them as ecologies, that is, as an assemblage of dissimilar objects and organisms – technological and organic, artificial and natural – that look and are categorized as distinct and incompatible, yet are intimately and reciprocally interconnected.

In popular culture and in official science literature, objects located in, and made for the laboratory, tend to have very similar appearances: minimal design accented by metallic and dull (beige, white, grey) colors stand for science’s aspiration towards predominantly functional and non-frivolous goals (or what popular culture sees as “objective”), well-structured and orderly ideas, and exact results. Traditional media and popular culture have represented laboratory practice as an activity reserved for a few specialized technicians and well-adjusted scientists. Their observations had the typical tendency to discourage touch and contamination as the ultimate threats. Important experiments and carefully protected knowledge lie in immaculate rooms; specimens and microbial organisms are preserved in well-sealed containers: specimens must be protected from invisible pathogens surreptitiously infiltrating from the outside world. In fact, in this vision of the lab there seems to be only two dimensions, the outside



and the inside. This lab appears to be populated by two entities, the fragile specimens lying in petri dishes and the agents threatening their liveliness.

That’s a desolate and unwelcoming landscape. It is also an old-fashioned idea of the lab and the scientific environment. The notion of the lab as a clean environment has been around at least since Pasteur demonstrated how isolation was necessary to make possible the identification and understanding of certain pathogens. While this practice revolutionized the role, the configuration and the appearance of the lab (Latour 1983), it also certainly contributed to disseminating certain expectations about how a lab is supposed to look and contain. It is true that care is important to prevent contamination. However, the lab is far from being a desolate space: the lab is populated by bodies (human and non-human), by instruments, by documents, by subjects, by voices, all elements that form a complex, lively and colorful ecology. To describe this scenario, Sarah Whatmore

speaks of “more than human” ecology, that is, the excess of the human, “which is constantly made and remade through assemblages, networks and systems,” and is located at the “feverish borders of animal/machine, social/material, flesh/information, cultural/natural (Whatmore, 2002). It is a complicated ecology where the life of laboratory organisms is constantly threatened, but this time, by an incessant dance of an infinite number of unidentified factors.

Willet’s menagerie of lab equipment and assemblages does not assert that we should transform the lab into something completely different. On the contrary, by mixing elements traditionally meant for pleasure and entertainment, and by employing design inspired by nature, popular culture, and different artistic genres, Willet’s contribution is crucial in re-assessing those formal binary, rigid and old-fashioned assumptions of the lab. The relevance of Willet’s work is to make the diverse nature of the populous content of the lab evident, by re-imagining and magnifying it as a “more than human” ecology. Willet’s work is joyous and humorous. This strategy transforms the lab into a space potentially connected to the fabric of everyday life. In addition, it demystifies some of the intimidating aspects of science, eliciting curiosity, a desire to explore and to further experiment. *Laboratory Ecologies* creates a multispecies dialogue that overcomes many assumed hierarchies: the animal, human and artificial are sewn together in unforeseen and for this reason especially intriguing ways.

Works cited:

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Dr. Jennifer Willet, Associate Professor in the School of Creative Arts, University of Windsor (Canada) is an internationally successful artist in the emerging field of bioart. In 2009 she opened a bioart research and teaching lab INCUBATOR: Hybrid Laboratory at the Intersection of Art, Science, and Ecology at the UofW.

Roberta Buiani is an interdisciplinary artist, media scholar and curator, and the co-founder of the ArtSci Salon at the Fields Institute for Research in Mathematical Sciences. Her work balances theoretical and applied research at the intersection of science, technology and creative resistance.

Cover: Jennifer Willet, *InsideOut: Laboratory Ecologies*, 2017. Installation view, Hamilton Artists Inc.

Pg 2: Jennifer Willet, *InsideOut: Laboratory Ecologies*, 2017. Installation view, Hamilton Artists Inc.

Pg 4: Jennifer Willet, *The Great Lakes Algae Organ*, 2016 & *Bioplay: Bacteria Cultures*, 2008. Installation view, Hamilton Artists Inc.

Pg 5: Jennifer Willet, *Lab Twin*, 2017. Installation view, Hamilton Artists Inc.

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