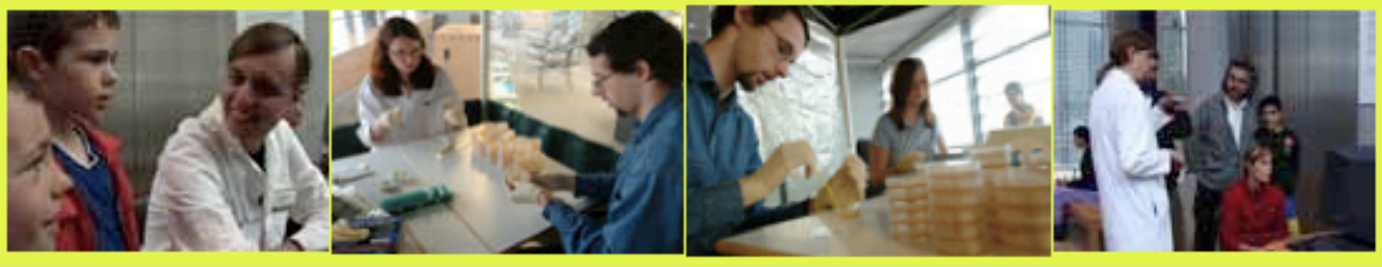
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Biotechnology

The Arts Catalyst



GenTerra - Critical Art Ensemble

GenTerra is a performance by the artists Critical Art Ensemble and Beatriz da Costa. GenTerra is the name used by the artists to represent a company dealing with "transgenics"—-the isolation of one or more genes from one or more organisms to create another, new organism. Products created through this process—-for example, transgenically modified foods—-have often caused controversy. GenTerra claims to produce organisms that help solve ecological or social problems

GenTerra is essentially a participatory "theater" comprising a lab tent, four computer stations displaying the company's informational CD-Rom, and a bacteria release machine. On entering the space, the public is invited to discuss the facts and issues surrounding transgenics with the artists and scientists, who are dressed in white lab coats. Materials are then provided to allow people to make and store their own transgenic bacteria in the GenTerra tent. Visitors become actively involved in the area of risk assessment by deciding whether or not to release bacteria from one of the twelve petri dishes of the release machine. Eleven of the dishes have wild (non-transgenic) bacteria samples taken locally, and one contains the transgenic bacteria. Should the dish with the transgenic bacteria be selected, a robotic arm will pick up the lid of the dish, leave it open for about 5 seconds, and then replace the lid on the dish. Participants are informed that the transgenic bacteria they may be releasing is a benign, crippled lab strain that is released in laboratories on a routine basis.

By setting itself up as a corporation that is driven by profit, but also by a sense of social responsibility, GenTerra highlights the complex relationship between for-profit ventures and the ethical considerations involved in transgenics research and product development. The project aims to make the general public more aware of transgenics, and the facts and fictions that surround it.