

# A RESPONSE TO LIFE'S EMERGENCIES: BIOARTCAMP AS TECHNIQUE OF ATTACHMENT TO LIFE

**Marie-Pier Boucher**

This paper addresses the contemporary 'biologization' of life generated by recent acceleration of technical performances. Drawing upon *BioARTCAMP*, I reflect upon a method for thinking about the possibility of attaching ourselves to life. By referring to the notion of camp as an architectural concept, I offer a critical analysis of the biotech future in terms of a spatial technology.



*Jennifer Willet, BioARTCAMP: A Rocky Mountain Adventure in Art and Biology, hosted by INCUBATOR Lab at The University of Windsor, and The Banff Centre, Banff National Park, 2011.*

*Participants: Ain Baxter, Marie-Pier Boucher, Zoot Derks, Tagny Duff, Jeanette Groenendaal, Kurt Illerbrun, Angus Leech, Marta De Menezes, Bulent Mutus, Jennifer Willet, Paul Vanouse, Tokio Webster, Grant Yocom, Britt Wray, David Dowhaniuk, Kacie Auffret, and Jamie L. Ferguson.*

*The war against war will be no camping party. [1]*

Hosted by Jennifer Willet from INCUBATOR: Hybrid Laboratory at the Intersection of Art, Science and Ecology in collaboration with the Banff Centre for the Arts, *BioARTCAMP* is an art/science collaboration that took place in July 2011 in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. Bringing together artists, scientists, theorists, filmmakers, and students, *BioARTCAMP* is best described as a camping expedition in the Rocky Mountains where the Rockies served as a camping site for building a portable biological laboratory. *BioARTCAMP*'s aim was to reinvent the ecology of biological laboratories. As Willet claims, biological laboratories are often represented as highly sophisticated and clean environments in addition to being perceived as sacred and esoteric spaces reserved for experts and specialists. However, in reality, they are often messy and dirty. As a consequence, their misleading representations generate misunderstandings about the conditions in which science is being done, and prevent public debate surrounding the biotech future. In order to resist these false assumptions, Willet pursued the objective to produce

alternative representations of biological laboratories by connecting their closed ecology to larger ecologies. In the present paper, I will refer to the notion of camp as a spatial concept in order to ask how the opening up of a milieu of interiority, of a closed -or sterile- environment (a traditional laboratory), to an open -potentially infectious- space (a camp-based laboratory), to a milieu of exteriority, a space of indeterminacy, a futurity, a changing potential, affected -or infected- the capacity of *BioARTCAMP*'s participants to attach themselves to life.

Recent acceleration of technical performances has indeed brought life to the fore. Bio-fuels, bio-weapons, bio-materials, bio-diversity, bio-morphism, bio-mimesis, bio-art or bio-architecture – name your own “bio” preference. Circulating transversally, life is today everywhere and nowhere. Seen and said. Smelled, touched, eaten. Addressing the concept of life requires a fine tuning and risky choices, making it both an adventure and a risk. In addition, the proliferation of biotechnology has reconfigured our relationship to it: life is no longer a phenomenon to observe and understand, but a series of mechanisms to reconfigure and transform. According to Henri Atlan, physician, biologist and Professor Emeritus of biophysics, biology passed from a science of observation to a biotechnology: it is now able, like physics and chemistry, to produce artificial living objects, machines of all kinds, and synthetic products. [2] That is to say biology is for him found in the reality of artefacts, in the art of making life.

The integration of the art of making life in contemporary practices implicitly resonates with the possibility to enliven the world. The claim is simple: by making things biological, life will proliferate. Engrained in the cracks of this claim is the idea that, biological materiality carries life's operational form. In other words, contemporary biotechnology generates a “biologization” of life. Literal insertion of biological materials into contemporary practices foregrounds an understanding of these materials as carriers of their own capacity to enliven the world. Often entangled in an engineering paradigm -which finds its point of culmination in the field of synthetic biology whose aim is to engineer life- biological life revives a substantialist conception of life, one based on the assumption that life is found in the physical corporeality of matter. In order to resist the phantasmatic view of a biological, all too biological world, I will proceed to articulate a kind of *a-biological* identity - without albeit negating life's biological mode of existence. I wish to ask how it is possible to resist and criticize the proliferation of biotechnology, its misleading representations as well as the biologization of life it generates, and at the same time facilitate the emergence of new modes of living. I will draw upon *BioARTCAMP* to reflect upon the construction of a method -“less a theory than an account of the conditions of the production of knowledge” [3] for thinking about the possibility of attaching ourselves to the whole of life. Biotechnology has not only brought a biologization of life, the specialization of biology has facilitated a division of biological life: molecular biology, tissue culture, genetics, etc. Thus, attaching ourselves to life implies the ‘discovery’ of life as a whole. In the form of a debriefing after a camping trip, I wish to question how *BioARTCAMP* has succeeded at filling the void left by contemporary biologization of life.

In order to grasp the potential for *BioARTCAMP* to facilitate an attachment to life as a whole, I suggest to understand it in terms of a speculative and experimental project. Speculative in the sense that it does not bring about solutions, but raises problems [4] and experimental in the sense that it presents these problems in the form of alternative futures. In other words, by speculating and experimenting on/with modes of vividness *BioARTCAMP* can be defined as a technique of attachment to the whole of life. While Willet's project concentrates on the technological apparatus proper to the manipulation of life (i.e. the laboratory), I wish to foreground bioart's potential to go beyond the mere subversion of technology and to address life both as a biological and a-biological mode of existence.

---

## ATTACHMENT AS EMERGENCY: CAMPING AS STRATEGY

---

In *Puissances du temps: Variations de Bergson*, French philosopher David Lapoujade explains the distinction Bergson draws between attention and attachment to life. Attention to life is the mechanism through which we adapt ourselves to the necessities of the world we live in. Attention to life, he adds, is biological: it is both anticipation and adaptation to the external world, a point of tension, which characterizes life's equilibrium, one that maintains a solidarity between psychological life and motor activity. For Bergson, says Lapoujade, intelligence is one of the main forms of inattention to life. Intelligence, he says, is when life becomes external to itself. [5] He adds that even if intelligence allows a greater adaptation to the material world, it is nevertheless a form of vital depression. In response to the negative effects generated by intelligence, Bergson invites us to detach ourselves from representation, which is a product of intelligence, and to attach ourselves to life. In fact, for Bergson, we do not only live by adapting ourselves to the world, but also, and maybe most importantly, by attaching ourselves to life. According to him, attachment to life may take three forms: (1) obedience; commitment to a social group; (2) belief; attachment to a group of supernatural beings, and finally; (3) creation or liberation, both derived from a commitment to the movement of life itself. [6] While the first two qualify closed societies and the creation of worlds reserved to humans, the third form of attachment qualifies open systems and creates a universe, a universe open to a plurality of worlds. For Bergson, the first two are tendencies that circumscribe the circles where human's deploy their humanity and result from the same vital imperative: "to conjure the depressing strength of intelligence, which slows down life's movement." [7] The first two modes of attachment are therefore, like intelligence and representation, forms of vital depression.

The proliferation of biotechnology has brought a fourth form of attachment, a biological form of attachment. A form of attachment situated at the intersection of closed and open systems, of creation and depression. While a biological attachment to life might result in the production of closed systems reserved to biological entities, it also holds the potential to create universes that are opened to a plurality of worlds. The distinction between these two modes of attachments (i.e. triggering creation or depression) is based on the understanding of biotech life; namely the difference between an attachment to the movement of life itself as opposed to an attachment to the forms through which it passes. That is to say, the difference between an immanence of spirit and a transcendence of intelligence. While the Western world has worked towards reducing the capacity for religion to act as its transcendental force of becoming -bringing back a virtual force of immanent appropriation- we ought to be careful at not making biotechnology a new transcendental form ready to govern our attachment to life. The issue at stake is therefore to develop a concept of attachment to life based on an immanent and spiritual processual relationality; a concept of life that recognizes the various beings (biological or not) that compose the universe. The issue at stake is also not to interpret Willet's goal of generating new representations in terms of an intelligible understanding of biological laboratories (adaptation), but rather in terms of a sensuous relation, namely an attachment to the movements triggered and deployed by her project. Up to now, I have laid the conceptual foundations for understanding the possibility of resisting the biologization of life by attaching ourselves to the movement of life itself, to life as a whole. Let me now explore how the notion of camp can trigger such an attachment.

Camp as an architectural concept commonly refers to a state of emergency. *BioARTCAMP* is no exception to that. For Willet, the emergency is based on the necessity to transform, alter and subvert biological laboratories' representations as well as to connect their closed ecology to external ecologies. In other words, Willet invited her guests to create techniques of ecological attachment. For me the emergency lies on the necessity to attach ourselves to the whole of life, meaning the possibility to resist the

biologization of life. From the Latin “campus,” the notion of camp refers to an open field. However building a camp-based lab nevertheless contradicts the idea of an open space proper to scientists who do field research. For instance, Kurt Illerbrun, one of the *BioARTCAMP*'s scientists explained that the spatial delimitations proper to the camp were for him constraints to his normal field of research, which does not rely on specific boundaries. Also borrowed from Old English, the etymology of camp refers to “contest,” to a “place where an army lodges temporarily.” [8] Even though the use of camp as contest became obsolete by the mid of the 15th century. it nevertheless speaks to *BioARTCAMP*. Bioartcampers could indeed be characterized as a soft army, one that aims at fighting against common assumptions about biotechnological development.

In *Camps: A Guide to 21st Century Space*, Charlie Hailey states that “defining the camp is a central problem of our contemporary moment.” Camps, he adds, “result from the exceptional circumstances of conflict, natural disaster, displacement and marginality.” [9] Historically speaking camps are for him no longer regarded as recreational and strategic spatial techniques. Today's camps, he argues, cover a much wider range of areas: experience, trauma, strategy, liberation, creativity amongst other things. For him, contemporary camps can be divided in three -albeit not mutually exclusive- categories: (1) autonomy, which he links to choice and autonomous organization; (2) control, which he explains in relationship with strategic camping areas regulated by systems of control and; (3) necessity, which qualifies spaces of relief and assistance, spaces that are constructed in response to perceived threats, expected hazards or immediate pressure. Following his categorization, *BioARTCAMP* would be situated at the intersection of autonomy and control. Even if *BioARTCAMP* acts as a response to various kinds of threats generated by the proliferation of biotechnology, it cannot be compared to the atrocities that forced people to build camps to ensure their survival – either political, economical, social, etc. (for instance, refugee, homeless and mass shelter camps to only name a few). *BioARTCAMP* was autonomous in its capacity to act simultaneously as a protest camp (protesting against the hegemonic understanding of biotech), an open camp for DIY practices, a hacker camp for hacking dominant representations, a transcamp, which brought together the “two camps” (art and science), and a public camp/open fair that brought the general public to share our experience.

In *What is Camp?* Giorgio Agamben asserts that camp is “the most absolute biopolitical space that has ever been realized” it is “a space in which power confronts nothing other than pure biological life without any mediation.” [10] In so doing, he foregrounds a notion of camp that also generates a biological understanding of life. For him, camps are spaces where states of exception become the rule. *BioARTCAMP*, however, did not function according to the permanence of a suspended rule of law. Quite the contrary all the ethical limitations, which are however best described as moral judgments, have not been suspended during the camping event. *BioARTCAMP* is therefore, unlike other forms of camps (here I cannot not refer to concentration camps), a place where jurisdictions were transgressed and even eliminated. Conversely, *BioARTCAMP* was engrained in juridical limitations that prevented the emergence of an attachment to life. In fact, the biotech-model relies on a juridical conceptualization of power, one rooted in politics of identities, categories, ambiguities and transgressions. A juridical conceptualization that recognizes concrete couplings between livings and livings -in the biological sense (for example humans and cells)- in the light of juridical scales that emerge from the formulation of categories, which in turn reproduce models of power described in terms of hierarchies, domination, exploitation, and transgression. For instance, in the context of *BioARTCAMP* work on vertebrates required ethics approvals while investigations on plants did not; a moral assumption that generated hierarchies and that broke

down the relationship between -or undo the intertwining of- plants and animals. Conducting interviews with human subjects who did not run any “risks” also required human ethics approvals while Paul Vanouse's extraction of his own DNA from his own saliva has been considered a banal action. The latter is engrained in a moral assumption based on a scientific division of life that lands on politics of identities and categories. The point of tension here is the fact that the abstract linkage between life and life conditions, and sometimes determines, their concrete couplings. Thus, by (1) negating the possibility of an ontological equality, and (2) asserting an ontological privilege to an already known -or pre-given- term of the relation, it feels like biotechnology's juridical reality may prevent an attachment to life as a whole. The choice of Banff's National Park as a camping site -a highly regulated area in Canada- therefore presented itself as both a productive and non-productive way of addressing the dominant juridical paradigm within which biotechnology is apprehended. On the one hand, it prevented the suspension of the law and negated the possibility for BioARTCAMP to be associated or compared to the horror inherent to certain camps of contemporary human history (for instance, concentration camps). However, it also prevented the possibility to speculate and experiment with the possibility of reconfiguring the moral norms that are established in Canada (and elsewhere).

Even if *BioARTCAMP's* spatial reality prevented us as participants to reinvent the biotech's regulations, it allowed us to engage differently with the normal course of actions regulated by traditional laboratories. The singularity of *BioARTCAMP* as a space-event was in fact its temporality. The main form of attachment that was foregrounded at *BioARTCAMP* is a temporal form of attachment. By asking participants to commit to two whole weeks, the experimental methodology initiated by Willet was literally an experiment on the mental state of every participant. We indeed not only committed to a social group and to supernatural forces (the stunning landscape, mountains, fresh air, rivers, etc.), we also committed to Paul Vanouse's PCR campfire, DNA and green racoon, to Marta de Menezes's petri dishes, agar and tetrahymena, to Iain Baxter & Louise Chance Baxter's wood mannequin, to August Leech music instruments and lyrics, to Jennifer Willet's multiple samples, to Tagny Duff's microbes, to Kurt Illeburn's caterpillars, to Bulent Mutus's chemical drawings, to the hostel's bunk beds, to our orange vests... We have experienced life as a whole by bringing together the various entities (biological or not) that together composed the camp. Unfortunately, the final detachment was a form of depression for many of us. Nonetheless, *BioARTCAMP* succeeded at demonstrating that biotech is a spatio-temporal technology, one that holds the potential to trigger the experience of new forms of durations by transforming/breaking up the spatial coherence of our usual working places.

By relating biotechnology with architecture my aim was not to avoid the ethical implications raised by contemporary manipulation of life. Conversely, it was a strategy to foreground (1) importance of spatial conditions in conducting research on living entities (sterility, air temperature, filtration, plumbing, etc.) and (2) the fact architecture is a technology that captures and conditions life's motion and that it shall in fact be considered as the oldest form of biotechnology. Accordingly, it was a method for understanding life in terms of a spatio-temporal relationality instead of a bio-physical entity. Hence, relating biotechnology to architecture ought to be interpreted as a technique of attachment to life.

## References and Notes:

1. William James, "The Moral Equivalent of War," *The Constitution Society*, 1906 <http://www.constitution.org/wj/meow.htm> (accessed August 10, 2011).
2. Henri Atlan, *Les Frontières de l'Humain* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2007), 7-8.
3. Didier Debaise *The Emergence of a Speculative Empiricism in Deleuze, Whitehead, Bergson. Rhizomatic Connections* ed. Keith A Robinson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 78.
4. Referring to Bergson, Deleuze asserts that "a speculative problem is resolved when it is well posed." Gilles Deleuze, *Le bergsonisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004), 4.
5. David Lapoujade, *Puissances du temps. Variations de Bergson* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2011), 81.
6. *Ibid.*, 82-92.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Online Etymological Dictionary, [http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=camp&searchmode=none](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=camp&searchmode=none) (accessed August 15, 2011).
9. Charlie, Hailey, *A Guide to 21st Century Space* (Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2009), 1.
10. Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti & Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 38.