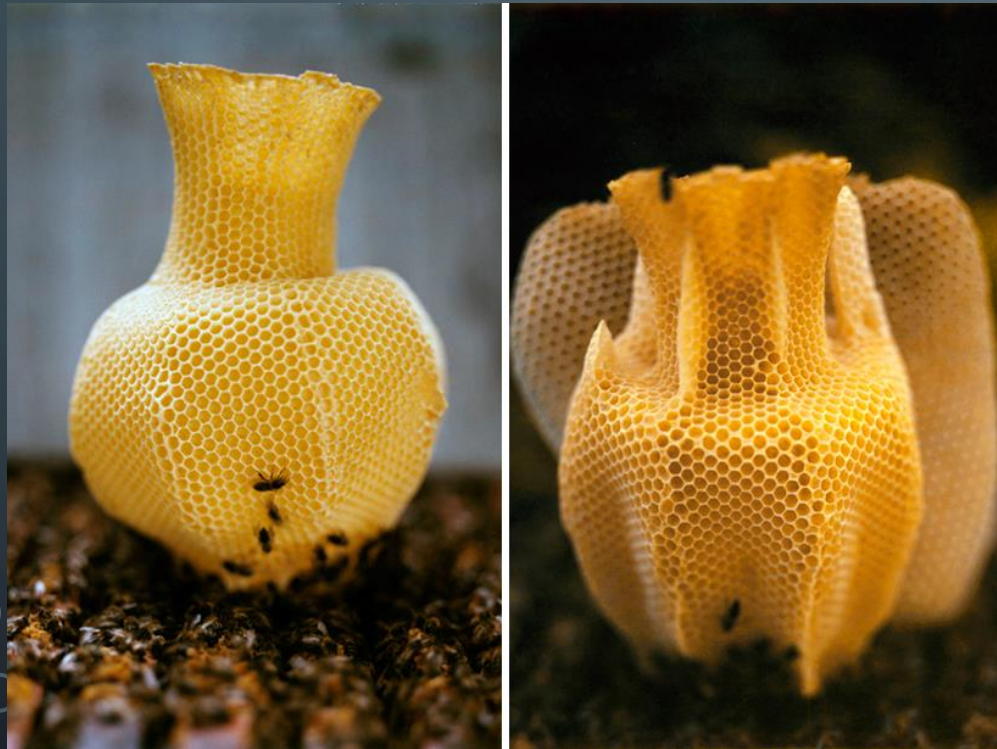


# MORE-THAN-HUMAN DESIGN, BIOART AND ETHICS



tomáš gabzdil libertíny, Honeycomb Vase (2006)

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# CONTENTS

- Nature, matter, posthumanisms (contextualisation)
- Question of life (concept and ontology) in the context of Western philosophies, cultural imaginaries, and posthumanism(s).
- Why does it matter for art and design?
- Bioart as a case study: The Tissue Culture & Art Project
- ‘Uncontainable life’ and ‘non/living matter’ => the question of more-than-human ethics (as a mode of conclusion)



# NATURE AND MATTER AND WESTERN THOUGHT

- The ways in which nature and matter (material reality) have been understood in Western philosophy since its very inception has had an enormous impact on how nature and other interlinked categories and “things” have been depicted in our cultural imaginaries.
- Dualist understanding of the world characteristic of Western thought: Plato (ideas vs mere matter); Aristotle (ideas as coexisting with passive matter, to which they give both shape and real existence); Descartes (to distinct substances: immaterial mind vs mechanistic body); etc.





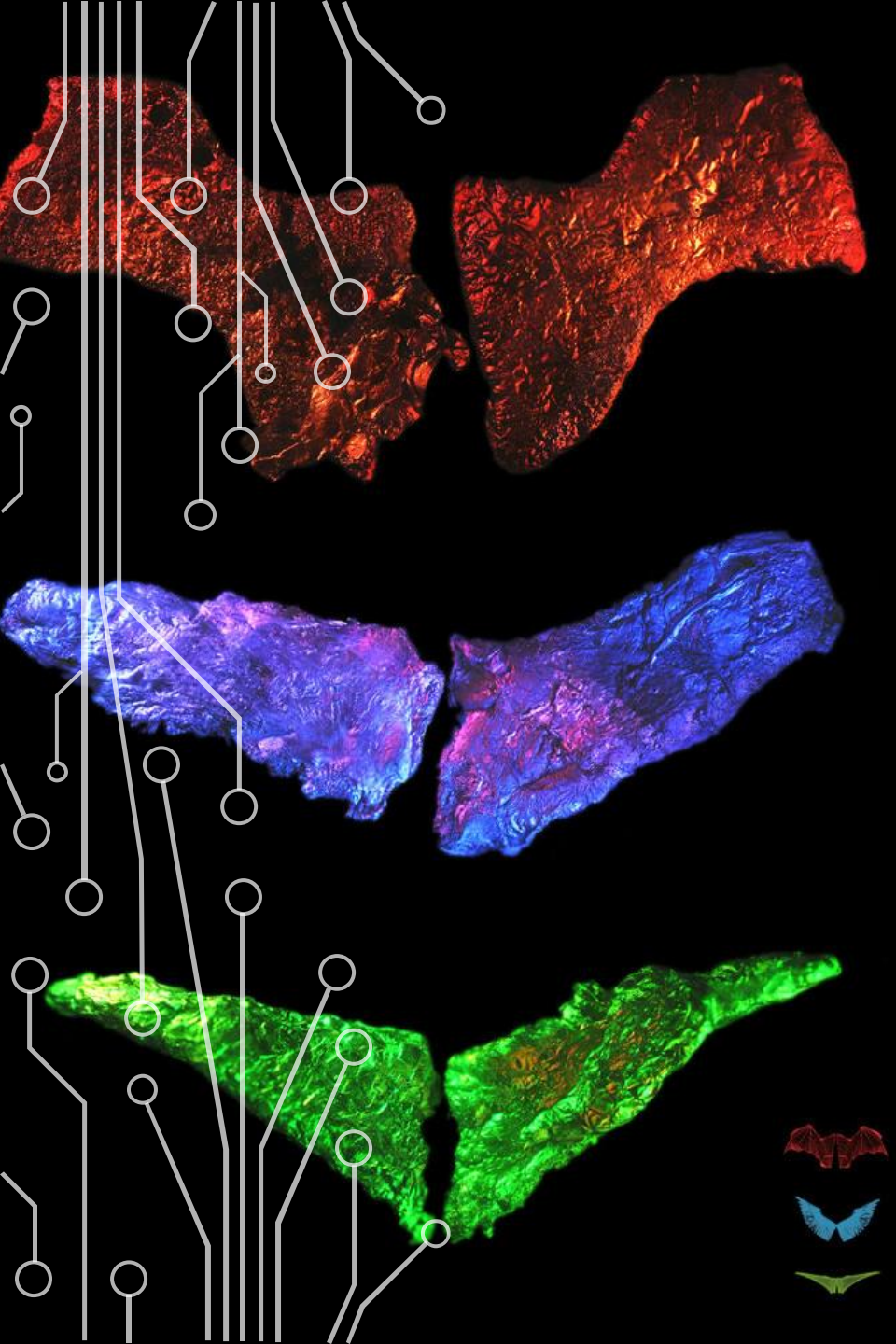
# GENEALOGY OF POSTHUMANIST THINKING

- Antihumanist thought of 1960s and the Frankfurt School: criticism of the Enlightenment humanist autonomous and rational human subject following the 20<sup>th</sup> century genocides (e.g. Althusser; Foucault; Lyotard; Horkheimer, etc.)
- But what happens to the human subject when 'life itself' becomes the subject of change, modification, intervention? (e.g. Donna J. Haraway's 'The Cyborg Manifesto') => 'posthuman biopolitics'
- Emergence of various forms of posthumanism

# POSTHUMANISMS

- Context: natural sciences and advanced bio- and information technologies do affect the lives of humans and nonhumans, and also intervene in life on molecular levels: tissues, cells and the genetic code itself.
- *Posthumanism as a current of thought which challenges the traditional idea of the human subject and takes into account the latter's relations to her/his nonhuman others (both organic and inorganic)*
- Focus on the question of the subject and relationality
- Thus, also emphasises the importance of the critique of anthropocentrism, and **often** – of speciesism





# LIFE AS A FUNDAMENTAL PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTION

- Traditionally in philosophy, life defined through its essence and ‘boundaries of articulation’ (i.e. classifications) => ‘philosophy of biology’ (Thacker 2008)
- Alternative approach: exploring and defining life through its relation(s) and processuality => ‘biophilosophy’ (Thacker 2008; Radomska 2016, 2020)
- Bioart = a current of contemporary art that involves the use of biological materials (cells, tissues, organisms) and scientific methods, tools and procedures.
- Bioartworks are characterised by vulnerability, intrinsic to all beings, and dependency on technologies that allow these creations to come into being, endure and flourish
- technologies both sustain and discipline organic matter.

Photo: TC&A, *Pig Wings* (2000-2001)

## ...BIODESIGN vs BIOHACKING (DIY BIO)

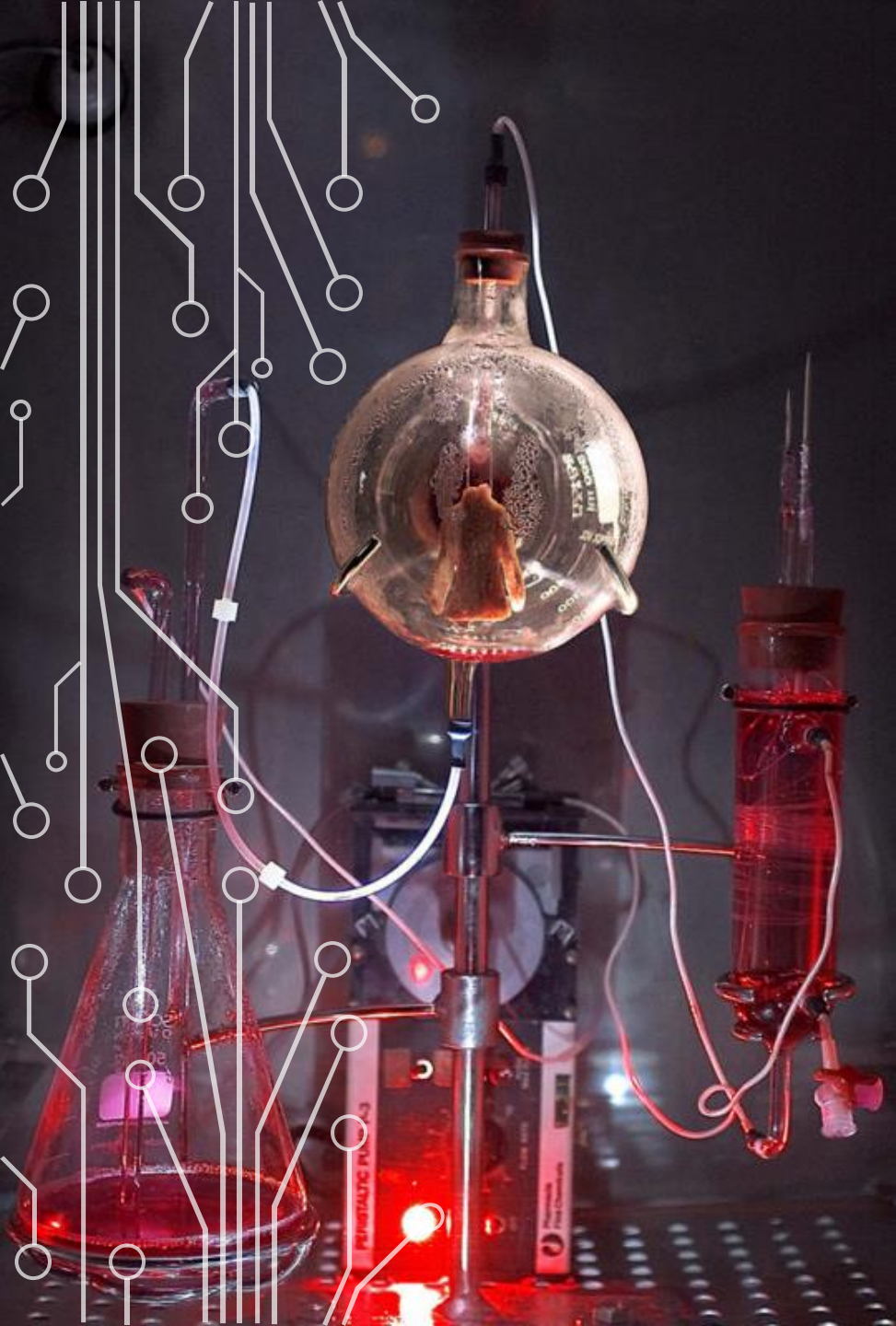
- **Biodesign:** the use of living materials and biotechnologies in order to create critical solutions and enhance both the properties and sustainability credentials of a finished product. For instance, it incorporates living organisms into design as support structures, material sources, energy generators, security measures, and air purifiers, just to name a few possibilities.
- **Biohacking/DIY bio:** biotechnological social movement in which individuals, communities, and small organisations study biology and life sciences using the same methods as traditional research institutions. It may incorporate hacker culture elements while working with wetware.



# THE TISSUE CULTURE & ART PROJECT

- Started in 1996 by Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr: 'an ongoing research and development project into the use of tissue technologies as a medium for artistic expression' (TC&A 2001)
- 'semi-living' sculptures, made of bioengineered animal tissues and biopolymer materials, require sterile conditions of a bioreactor and constant care in order to survive
- Aim: to engage with the question of how the employment of semi-living products may affect the risks linked to both new and old technologies, as well as how shifting the mode of production from manufacturing to growing may affect the environmental issues related to the processes of production and consumerism.



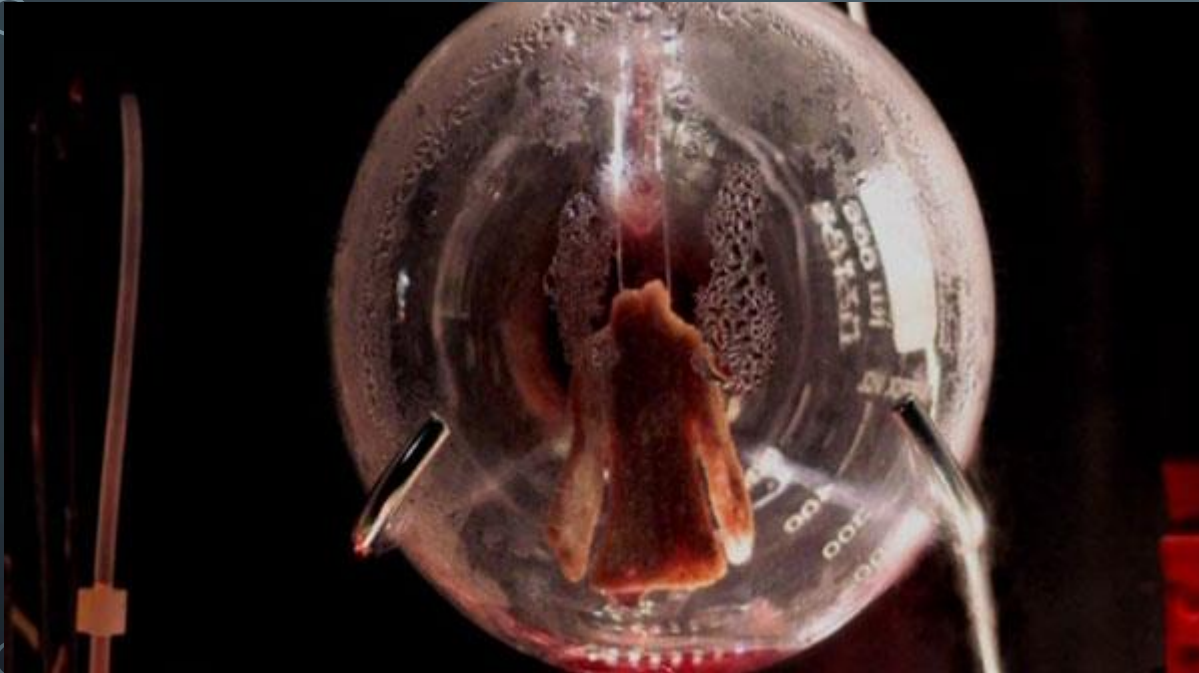


## *VICTIMLESS UTOPIA* SERIES

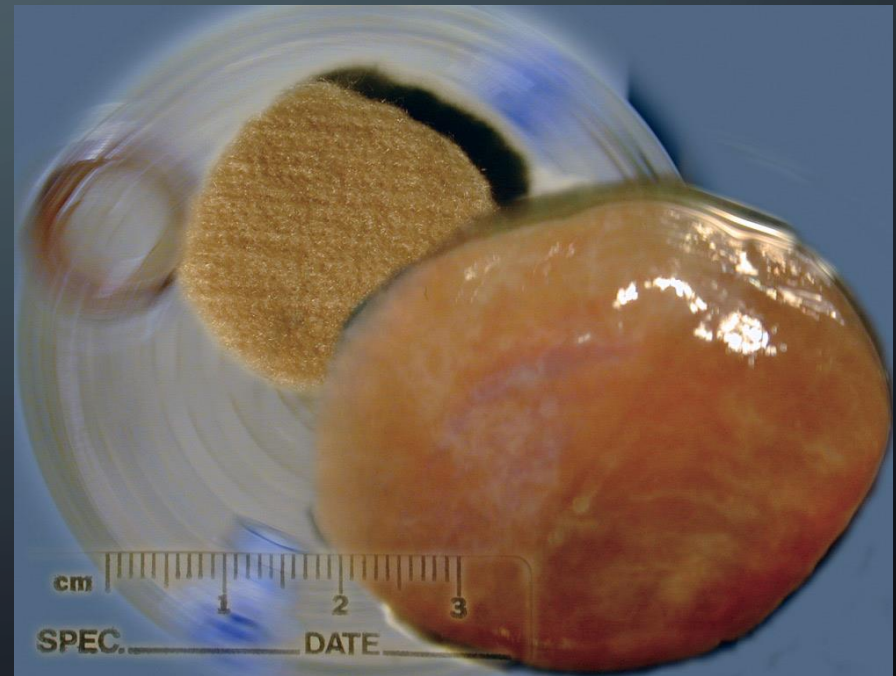
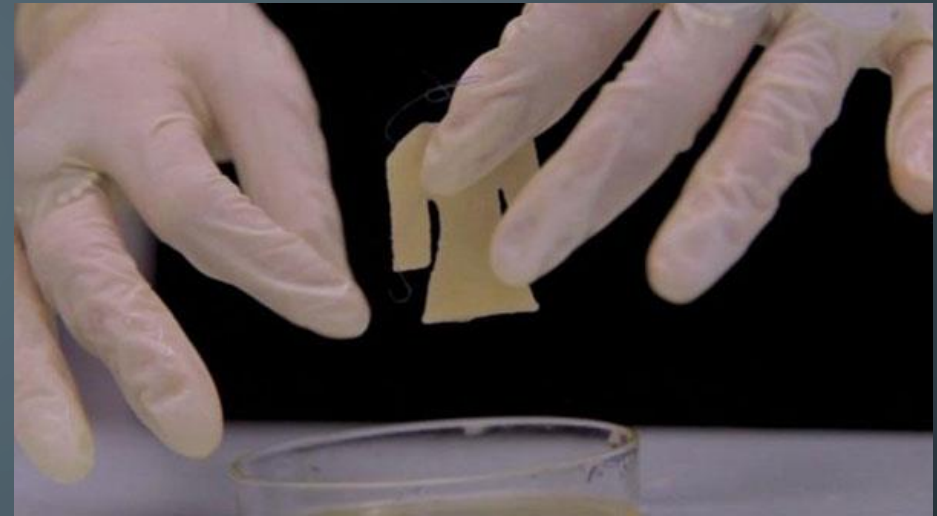
- includes: *Victimless Leather* (2004); *Disembodied Cuisine* (the creation of 'cruelty-free meat'; 2003) and *DIY De-victimizer Kit* ('re-life-ing' of animal bodies previously killed through the use of technology; 2006).
- conceptualised and designed to deal with the issues of animal consumption (in the form of both meat and leather), commodification and exploitation.
- living in and consuming the world is never victimless. Rather, we should ask ourselves which lives matter, which are recognised as the ones to be valued, and the ones to be mourned.
- to look deeper and not just stop at the surface: to reflect on our anthropocentric optics and ethics, our ways of relating to the nonhuman, as well as of attending to and consuming the world that we form part of (cf Radomska 2018).

Photo: TC&A, *Victimless Leather* (2004)

# VICTIMLESS UTOPIA



TC&A, *Victimless Leather* (2004)



TC&A, *Disembodied Cuisine* (2003)



# VICTIMLESS LEATHER (2004)

**The New York Times** **Science**

WORLD U.S. N.Y. / REGION BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY SCIENCE HEALTH ENVIRONMENT

## Museum Kills Live Exhibit

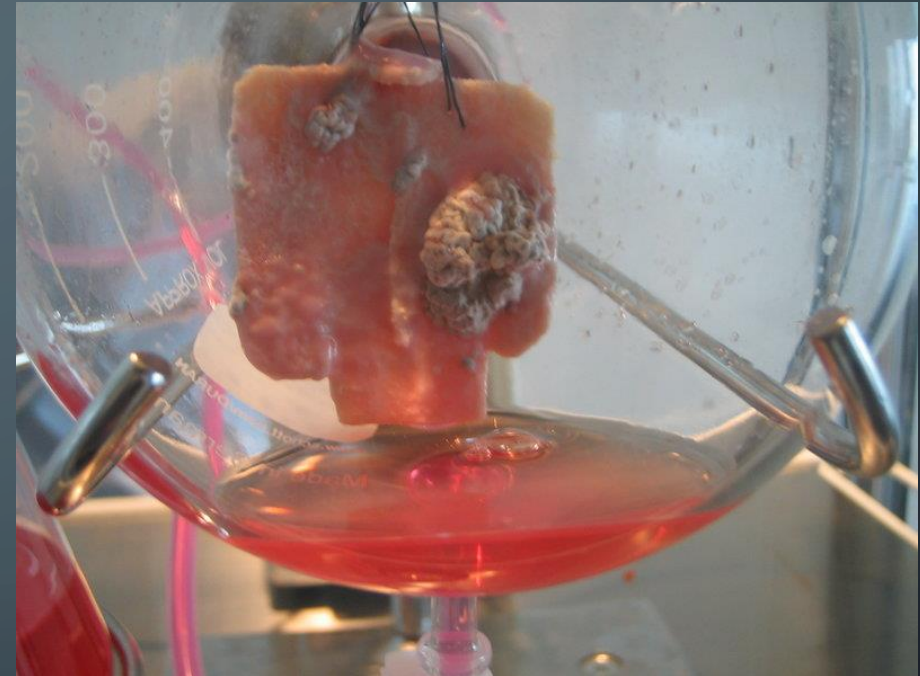
By JOHN SCHWARTZ  
Published: May 13, 2008

Art is deathless, the poets say. Unless it isn't.

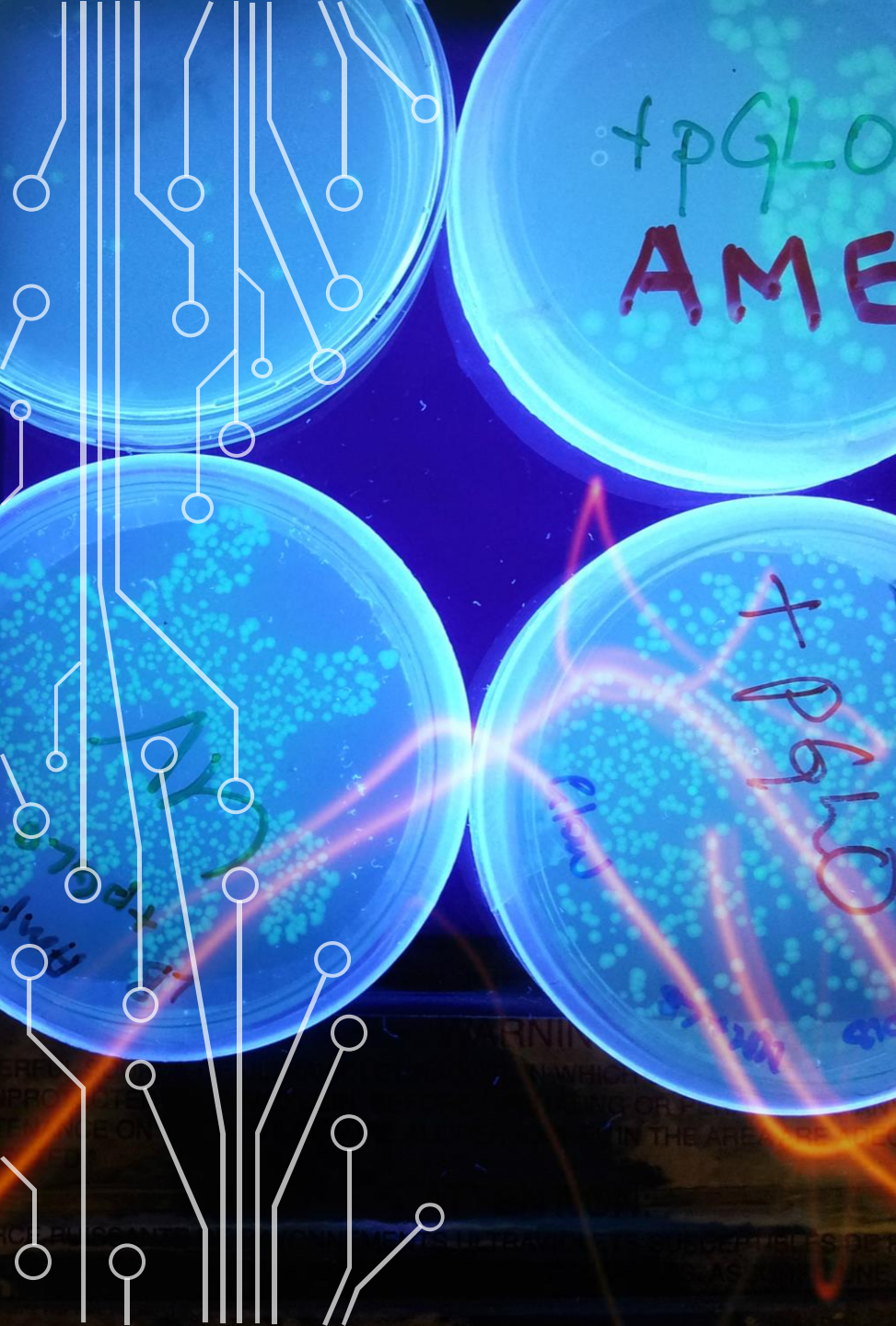


One of the strangest exhibits at the opening of "Design and the Elastic Mind," the very strange show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York that explores the territory where design meets science, was a teeny coat

*Victimless Leather* (2008) at Museum of Modern Art, NY, USA



*Victimless Leather* (2010) at the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan.



# HOW DOES THIS AFFECT OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPT OF LIFE?

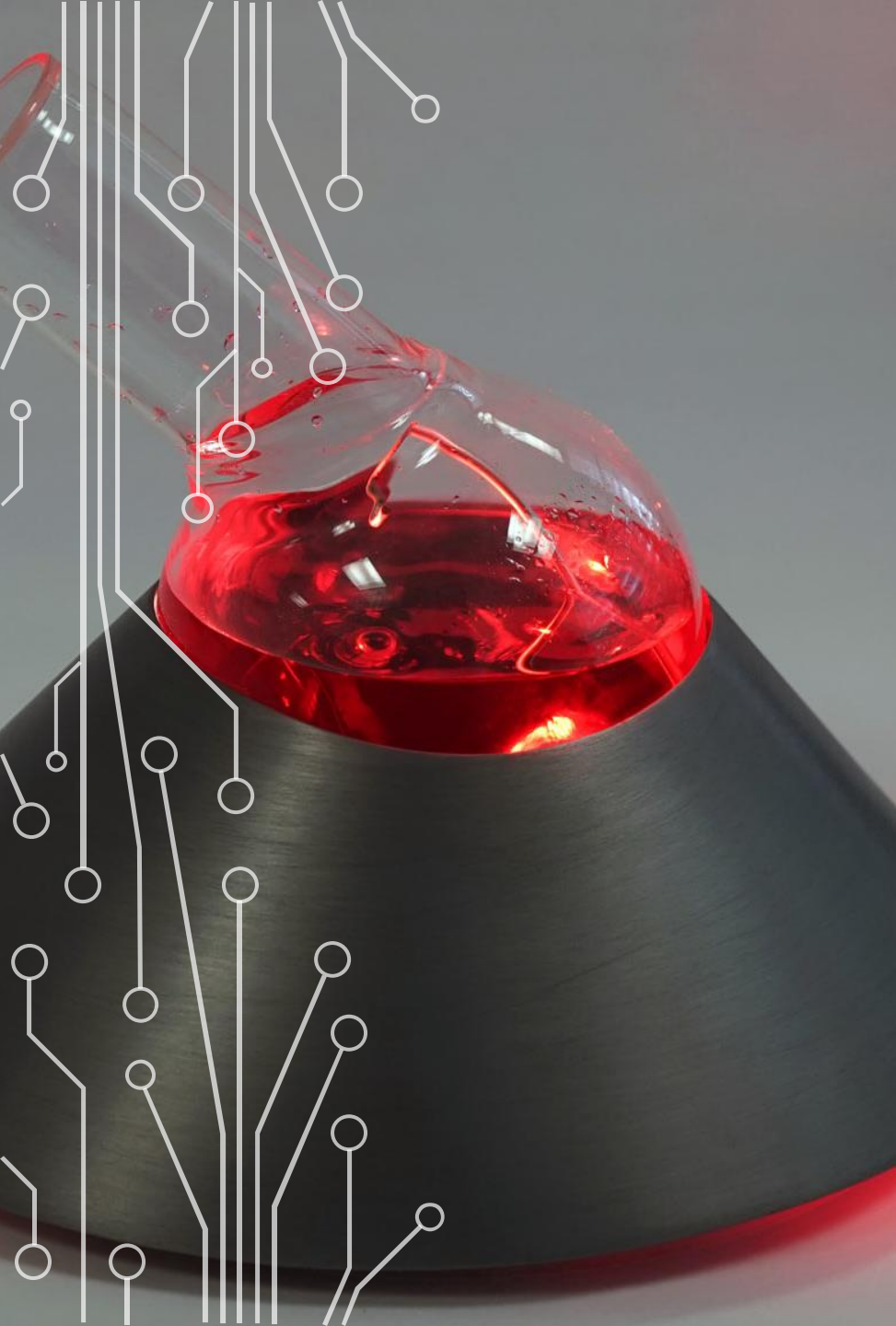
- Process ontologies: an 'immanent flux' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987)
- Non-dialectical concept of difference, dynamic idea of matter, duration and becoming
- Life understood as 'the non/living':
  - ✓ responds to the question of locating constitutive characteristics of life (what counts as life and how we account for life forms that do not fulfil the four basic criteria of the living);
  - ✓ Accounts for the complexity of the relationship between living and dying (and the living and non-living)
  - ✓ Accounts for the relation/dependence between biomatter and technology





# REMARKS ON MORE-THAN-HUMAN ETHICS

- ONTOLOGY OF LIFE (REVISITED) MANIFESTS: EXCESS (TRANSGRESSING BODILY BOUNDARIES), DEFICIENCY (EXPRESSING ITSELF IN THAT WHICH DOES NOT FULFIL THE CONVENTIONAL CRITERIA OF 'LIFE') AND DISPLACEMENT (THROUGH ITS ENTWINEMENT WITH DEATH).
- ETHICS ≠ MORALITY
- FOR SPINOZA 'ETHICS, WHICH IS TO SAY, A TYPOLOGY OF IMMANENT MODES OF EXISTENCE, REPLACES MORALITY, WHICH ALWAYS REFERS EXISTENCE TO TRANSCENDENT VALUES ... MORALITY IS THE SYSTEM OF JUDGEMENT' (DELEUZE 1988: 23).
- KAREN BARAD'S 'ETHICO-ONTO-EPISTEMOLOGY' (2007); MARGRIT SHILDRICK'S 'ETHICS OF RISK' (2002); JACQUES DERRIDA'S 'ETHICS OF HOSPITALITY' (DUFOURMANTELLE & DERRIDA 2000)
- AN ATTENTIVE APPROACH TO EVER-CHANGING DIFFERENCE, WHICH SHOULD BE SIMULTANEOUSLY COMPLEX, PARTICULAR AND EXPRESSED ON A CASE-BY-CASE BASIS.



- TC&A's bioartworks catalyse situations and encounters that force us to ask ourselves how such forms of the non/living alter our perceptions; how we relate to them; and finally, what kind of responsibility we take in these particular instances. None of the answers are given in advance .
- As Derrida writes, 'A future that would not be monstrous would not be a future; it would already be a predictable, calculable and programmable tomorrow. All experience open to the future is prepared or prepares itself to welcome the monstrous *arrivant*' (1995: 286–7).

Photo: Oron Catts, Ionat Zurr & Robert Foster, *Better Dead than Dying* (2014)



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