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SPECIAL ISSUES: TECH FLESH

Tech Flesh 3: The Hexterminators

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CTheory: Can you tell us a little bit about the Hexterminators' strategies towards intervening in the legal and economic issues surrounding biotech?

Biogrrrl: We are artist-agitators and interventionists, continuously developing, evolving and extending multiple strategies of interference to disrupt, subvert and expose the biotechnology industry. As artists on the street level we can generate laughter about the absurdity of biotech greed through street theatre, actions, web publishing, radio theatre and other forms, transforming outrage and passion toward combating the bio-buffoons into a concrete alternative in which communities create the game, not billion-dollar corporations.

Super Rat Grrrl: Our primary tactic is to create a disruptive force that calls into question the patenting of our food supply and the complex web of the biotechnology industry. Our choice of media remains fluid to better serve the occasion at hand. An example is our disruption of Monsanto Corporation's presentation of all the "wonders" of genetically engineered cotton to textile buyers at a cotton conference in one of San Francisco's most elegant and exclusive hotels. They forgot, of course, to mention the disaster of their Bt cotton crop.

The Hexterminator: We picked up where others failed and remonstrated the entire conference with a fashion show they would never forget. Wearing extraordinary 'one of a kind' outfits displaying the finest designs in cotton, irresistibly complemented with red biohazard symbols, we sashayed to the front and reclaimed the podium. Shouting, "I'd rather go naked than wear GE cotton!" we slowly stripped off our Hazardous Cotton Outfits.

Super Rat Grrrl: A constant in our strategy has been the use of costume. Our costumes can range from outrageous to extremely

conservative in order to blend in with the surroundings, making us seem almost invisible, up until, let's say, the moment a pie is thrown. To paraphrase Manuel Castells; "Costumes and witchcraft are precisely what is needed to walk between the uncertain boundaries of society."

The Hexterminator: And we walk those boundaries in the guise of superheroes, appearing where least expected, with our glaring genetic errors on view for the genetix freak show. You may run into Super Hex Man on the streets, his extra pair of eyes hanging from his cheeks, murmuring to passers by, "My parents, they wanted blue eyes," or you may see Super Mutanto at an FDA hearing trying to give away dead sterile terminated seeds to the commissioners.

Super Rat Grrrl: We also use strategies like our do-it-yourself labeling campaign. Easy to do, popularize, and replicate, you apply the labels to shelf products in stores yourself. The Organic Consumers Association keeps a list online of products that have genetically engineered ingredients almost anything with soy in it (<http://www.purefood.org/>). Anyone, anywhere, can print out their own labels and go to it. (The Campaign to Label GE Foods also lists current crops at <http://www.thecampaign.org/foodlist.htm>)

The Hexterminator: Ultimately, the genetix devolution is a "Carnaval of Biolife," a Russian Roulette that the public has not been allowed to impact in any meaningful way.

CTheory: The contexts within which biotech research is being done is increasingly a mix of government-funded and corporate-funded projects. should these remain separate university based or academic research separate from corporate interests?

Biogrrrl: The ability to even make a distinct separation between corporate, government, and academic biotech research has become increasingly difficult of late. We see the "revolving door" between government agencies responsible for genetic engineering research and monitoring and the biotech corporations, who are more than willing to provide their own functionaries to steer these offices. The US government even shares patents on imperialist technologies like the terminator, our namesake, with these corporations.

Super Rat Grrrl: And biotech corporations have also taken a much more powerful role in the universities than simply funding research, which we think is scary enough! We now see entire university departments bought and paid for by some of the most monstrous corporations in the world. The faculty and students in these situations become essentially corporate slaves, forced to do research which is most beneficial to the bottom line rather than public necessity. As a group, we believe private interest inspired solely by greed should not be the foundation upon which education is based.

Biogrrrl: Which is why we see more and more research money being placed into developing more deceptive ways to increase pesticide use

through resistant crops or into further means of idealizing and patenting the human.

The Hexterminator: And so, we've said, "Throw pie at the corporate oligarchy!" At the merger of the College of Natural Resources of University of California Berkeley and Novartis Corporation we had our Super Hero agents infiltrate their self-congratulatory press conference. As the worst of their gloating commenced, a delicious vegan pumpkin pie flew in the face of the Dean of the College of Natural Resources for selling out what should be a school for sustainable technologies, and another delicious organic pie flew in the face of the Novartis CEO, showing him that non-engineered is tasty enough.

CTheory: One of the primary issues with both biomedical and agricultural biotech is the issue of patenting. What is your position on patenting? What kinds of policies should exist to ensure that individuals and/or communities retain rights to their own bodies?

Super Rat Grrrl: Our position on patenting life is the same position we take on any other effort to colonize; it is theft and we oppose it.

Biogrrrl: Is life a commodity that should be owned and defined by a few global multi-billion dollar life science corporations? Over 95% of all patents are held by large companies or government institutions, and it's only since 1980 that life forms have even had the potential to be patented, which has led to a new phase of colonialism through the food supply.

Super Rat Grrrl: In the US, people blindly trust the Food & Drug Administration to inform the public when there is the potential for danger. People trust the Environmental Protection Agency to examine the ecological ramifications of GE agriculture. These agencies have failed to do that. Instead, the government is simply allowing billion dollar corporations to use the earth and our bodies as their testing ground without our knowledge or consent. Though some people are calling for the labeling of GE foods so that the public may choose what they consume, the Hexterminators believe labeling is not enough. There must be a moratorium on all GE foods until there is long-term testing on the environment, human and animal health.

Biogrrrl: A lot of the disruption of the WTO meetings in Seattle in 1999 was because of patents, intellectual property provisions, and the destructive effect this is having on farmers and poor people worldwide. The WTO is imposing international private tyranny. The more trade meetings we can shut down, the more illegitimate agreements we will halt and block. We saw the mark that creativity had in expressing social issues at the WTO protests.

The Hexterminator: Some of our Super Heroes show what it is like when we lose control of our bodies. One member of the Hexterminators is Miss Monsanto, our genetically engineered Beauty-Queen-gone-wrong. She often breaks out into screams of rage and fury. Her skin,

which had been engineered for flawless perfection, is instead broken by boils and lesions, a sadly repulsive glitch in her engineering.

Biogrrrl: Fortunately, there's a lot of exciting movement right now on this issue. Recently the UN human rights body pointed out the conflict between the World Trade Organization's Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) and international human rights law. Over the last decade the world has seen massive protests and riots in India in response to provisions on the ownership of life forms and the Monsanto corporation's destructive patenting of seeds. Patenting laws have superceded the human rights to food, health and self determination and the United Nations is finally acknowledging that.

CTheory: What can a community do when its natural resources are being appropriated and developed by biotech companies? Is the notion of "informed consent" a plausible option? In cases of "biopiracy" do economically disadvantaged communities have anything to gain from negotiating with biotech companies?

The Hexterminator: What kind of negotiation is possible when there is such a power disparity? Imbalances in trade, economic, and military power obliterate negotiation. With the outcome of biotech experimenting and biohazard release being possible ecocide or biocide, where is the informed consent?

Biogrrrl: The Human Diversity Project, which took the cell lines of indigenous people all over the world, best expressed this current phase of Western colonial appropriation: "We are going to annihilate indigenous people, but we need their human genetic information for medical and scientific diversity for us later."

Super Rat Grrrl: In India the farmers have revolted against biocorporations using their land as testing ground. They burned up all the test crops and demanded they not be used or coerced into buying bioengineered seeds. Unfortunately, no country can keep GE foods out because it would violate WTO provisions stating that a product must be proven as a health or environmental hazard in order to prohibit trade. Ironically, the biocorporations conduct the tests.

Biogrrrl: At this moment there is a biohazard scandal in the US, where corn not tested for human consumption was released into the food supply. The farmers are angry because they were not informed sufficiently by the biotech companies on the extent of buffer zones and the likelihood of cross pollination. They were lied to by biotech corporations. Consumers are angry and frightened because they have unknowingly been eating "frankencorn", with unknown consequences.

The Hexterminator: And we saw this coming last year, when we invaded a Safeway supermarket, which we re-christened "The Un-SafeWay." In disguise as upstanding citizens, we blocked the check-out lines, demanding that the management tell us which foods had genetically engineered ingredients, so that we could make a choice.

They were unable to answer us, so we paraded around the store with our signs, letting everyone know this is The Un-SafeWay to deal with our food. Super Butter Fly gave out coupons and information on organic products, we were simulcast on the radio, and business as usual was shut down.

CTheory: What kinds of roles can biotech activism have in relation to biotech? Is the public at large being led astray by the biotech industry?

Super Rat Grrrl: The public is certainly being led astray; with billions of dollars invested in public relations by biocorporations to tell people that this is the only way to solve world hunger, that science is the only solution to all worldly woes. In fact, the food the public is eating is engineered to have a longer shelf life, to serve as a pesticide, to withstand larger doses of pesticides, to kill itself in order to prevent saved seed farming, and may even contain transgenic allergens causing potentially deadly allergic reactions. We can't forget that these same companies which promote themselves as the cure all for society's problems are the same companies which have polluted our neighborhoods with toxins, propped up dictatorships to increase their bottom line, and placed the world's food supply into the hands of a few wealthy men in suits.

The Hexterminator: So, as activists, we use creativity to disseminate information outside of the mainstream media systems.

Biogrrrl: And there other types of active roles through larger bodies such as the United Nations, organizations like the Rural Advancement Foundation International, in national governments, in the courts and further. With such a fundamentally dangerous instrument as biotechnology, we see activists everywhere, as they should be. Anti-genetic engineering resolutions are being passed by city councils all across the US, most recently in Minneapolis, Cleveland, Boulder, San Francisco, Austin, and Boston. Direct action sabotage of biotech crops and test sites has continued in the US. There have been over 37 sabotages of GE crops in North America in the past two years, and no arrests have been made.

The Hexterminator: Pulling genetically engineered crops is not sabotage! It's decontamination!

Super Rat Grrrl: True enough. Even the Biotech giant Novartis is pulling back, eliminating GE ingredients from their entire worldwide line of food. They obviously have succumbed to public pressure. We can fight for a moratorium until the research is controlled democratically, not under the auspices of capital growth. We invite others to get involved, read more, check all the sources, and try as much as we are allowed to make informed decisions, supporting organic agriculture as much as possible. We also invite others to help actualize an alternative culture of resistance that popularizes and extends the international movement for global justice.

In October of 1998 several ArtActivists came together united to oppose what is clearly a high-tech form of colonialism, exploitation and biodevastation: the genetic engineering of our food supply. These Bay Area artists, who call themselves the Hexterminators, are roughly an affinity group of politically-minded performance artists concerned about biodevastation and corporate colonialism. There are many ethical issues in the field of biotechnology today, but the primary focus of this particular group is with the industry's agricultural applications. Further information about The Hexterminators can be found on their website, <http://www.artactivist.com/>

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