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REVIEWS

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Tel: +44 (0)20 7843 3620; Fax: +44 (0)20 7843 3629

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JAPAN: nature@naturejpn.com

Rinoko Asami, Nature Japan KK

Tel: +81 3 3267 8751; Fax: +81 3 3267 8746

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Earlier this summer, the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London organized an event called Genes Talking. As well as a series of lectures and panel discussions, which in themselves are a familiar format, the ICA theatre became “the unique site for a ground-breaking, time-based installation, transforming into a live, working scientific laboratory” — a sequencing laboratory!

Although science and art are often perceived as mutually exclusive, science has inspired artists for centuries. For more contemporary examples you only need to look at our journal covers or, casting the net wider, at ‘Ecce Homology’ — an interactive bioart installation, shown at The 32nd International Conference on Computer Graphics and Interactive Techniques (SIGGRAPH 2005); it uses dynamic media, computer vision and computer graphics to visualize genomic data.

But moving a laboratory into an ‘art space’ is somewhat different. The ICA project was specifically focused on the genetics of language. What the visitors to the gallery/laboratory witnessed (many probably without realizing) was the search for a candidate gene that underlies specific language impairment (SLI). The visitors were invited to join in the analysis of the data; a web site (www.genestalking.co.uk) with information on the project, DNA sequencing and the Human Genome Project was set up and feedback could be sent to a well-thought-out e-mail address: genestalking@deoxyribonucleicacid.co.uk.

Curiously, there was essentially no press coverage of the project, although there was a radio programme about it. Who went to see it? Was it of interest to scientists? Did some of them feel that their work had suddenly become more ‘glamorous’? What did the public get out of it? Did they become informed about how human genetics is done or did they have a more esoteric experience? In other words, was it science or art?



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