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Hacking life: the summer camp

We head to a Finnish art-school for the first ever festival of bio-art to find out if hacking cells is the future

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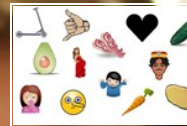
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In the midst of an unseasonal Finnish heatwave twenty international artists, scientists, designers and architects squirmed themselves away in a biotechnology lab to explore the interfaces between art and synthetic biology. Convening proceedings was Erich Berger, director of the [Finnish Society of Bioart](http://bioartsociety.fi/) - the organisation responsible for arranging the (aptly titled) 'MAKING LIFE' series of workshops. Playing host to the participants was [Aalto University's](http://www.aalto.fi/en/) [Biofilia lab](http://biofilia.aalto.fi/en/laboratory/), the first synthetic biology facility built expressly for an art school.

But what is synthetic biology? We've covered it [before](/artsandculture/article/17671/1/top-ten-future-organisms) [here](/artsandculture/article/19545/1/lets-play-farmville-with-our-dna) [here](/artsandculture/article/19917/1/what-happens-when-animals-and-technology-collide), and depending on the persuasion of who you ask, it is either going to "save the world"®, or it is going to be the Napster moment for humanity's utter disregard for all living processes. Put simply, it is the engineering of cells: using science to play with, and create, life.

Many takes on synthetic biology were offered. Bio-security and bio-risk expert [Marcus Schmidt](http://www.markusschmidt.eu/) was on hand to clarify that Synthetic Biology entails (among other things): 'Engineering DNA-based biological circuits, including standard biological parts'. That definition underscores the fact that synthetic biology goes a little bit beyond your ordinary, garden-variety genetic engineering – it is instead about life-defining science, combined with cadres of engineers disposed towards optimising, scaling and improving systems.

So what do you learn at a Bio-Art Workshop such as this? The workshop spanned the spectrum of means available to artists who want to engage, comment upon or work with the materials and ramifications of the ballooning biotechnology industry. Over the course of six days, participants learned how to genetically engineer glowing bacteria and become biopunk scientists with lofi approaches to lab apparatuses. Bio-artists who have made notable contributions to this field were on hand to elaborate upon their artistic process and practice.



Photocells being printed

Especially interesting was [Oron Catts](http://tcaproject.org/) (<http://tcaproject.org/>) highlighting the hype around synthetic biology. By way of illustrating his latest work – the 'Mechanism of Life' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3DRmq1phGQ>) wherein a 3D printer prints protocells – he notes that synthetic biology is a century old term steeped in the at times fierce debate about what constitutes a living thing.

Harking back to bygone days when the soft sciences didn't find themselves excluded from the debate regarding scientific advances is an important precedent to recall. Nowadays nobody bats an eyelid when 'startup mode' and 'synthetic biology' are mentioned in the same breath. That's in spite of the fact that the same mindset and environment that makes that synergy possible is 100% toxic to the sort of [measured decisions](#) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asilomar_Conference_on_Recombinant_DNA) requisite to technology that hopes to reengineer the oldest life on earth into the factory floor of the future.

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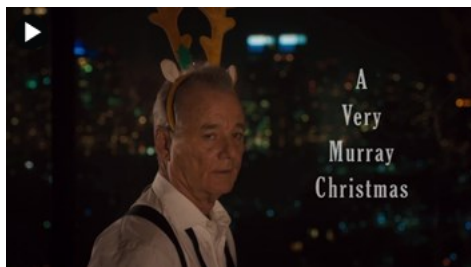
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