

Contemporary Art and the Genetic Code

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# Models, Metaphors, and Matter

Artists and Scientists Visualize Scientific Concepts

## Cellular Archaeology

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Fashioning a chart with scissors and paste, the laboratory technician matches identical pairs of chromosomes in alphabetical and numerical size places. This artificial arrangement of “colored bodies,” reminiscent of paper dolls, is known as a karyotype. Congruent with an ideogram or a shorthand language, this synthetic arrangement behaves like a museum display, encoding a morphology of signs. A cellular archaeologist, the laboratory investigator correlates subtle differences in identity among specimens. Differences, for example, between a fish, a flower, or a bacteria can be discerned by looking at linear configurations of an organism’s abstract sequence. As arrangements of sets, chromosomes form categories by which types of life are catalogued. Through a system of reduction, the organism’s mathematical formula is translated from an invisible understructure of living matter to a visual notation. As with the Cubists, the sign becomes an abbreviated blueprint of cultural code summarizing the materialization of idea into visual form. In contrast, biological signs employ an assembly of life fractions to form the basis of their scientific symbols. Defining an organism from a collection of fragments creates a fabricated condition comparable to metonymy and museum display.

When cultural traces are put into a museum, or as Douglas Crimp states, taken out of context and put into a fictional historical lineage, this institutional structure of depository and presentation alludes to the concept of universal knowledge.<sup>1</sup> The karyotype, like the museum display, constructs the notion of identity from material configuration and style. Does material evidence form the basis of identity alone or, as with art, do methods of environmental manipulation control evolutionary development? Whereas this form of genetic mapping is being replaced by a molecular script, archaic scientific diagrams force the question of how information is transferred from a scientific system to a cultural one. (Even when defunct in



Suzanne Anker, *Zoosemiotics: Primates*, 1993, glass vessel (1000 ml), steel, water, hydrocol, and metallic pigment, 82 × 144 × 84 inches. Hanes Art Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

science, biological signs retain cultural significance.) The chromosome, perhaps second only to the double helix, marks the twentieth century’s iconic interest in the invisible. As abstract language interfaces with global and cybernetic space, the lines distinguishing scientific iconology from cultural consequence are engaged and mutually transformed. How does an image move from scientific discourse into cultural space?

Note

1. Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 44–64.