

THROUGH THE MICROSCOPE GLASS: Reimagining the affect of forgotten bodies

Sarah-Mace Dennis

There is an energy that lives inside people, inside things. The gentle intensity of the experiences that we have in our worlds move through skin, casting experiential echoes that alter the cellular conditions of our bodies. These are forces that remain unseen: resonances that linger quietly inside limbs, nerve tissue and synaptic pathways. Although we cannot reach out and hold the virtual momentum of things now gone, the movement of events that happened in another time and another place, still colour space with their own duration. The energy of these things leave a trace that means something. They have the potential to change other things long after they are gone.

For Svenja Kratz, art is about reconfiguring the materials and corresponding scaffolds of knowledge that unfold from the *event* of scientific discovery. Entangling the methodologies and raw materials that mobilise these events inside both real and imagined revelations, Kratz reconfigures them. In doing so, she re-opens the gestures of closure that often slows down scientific duration when finite discoveries are made at the end of an experiment.

It is 2007. Kratz is in a lab at the Queensland University of Technology's Institute of Biomedical Health and Innovation (IHBI). It is here that she begins to uncover the possibilities of working with cell and tissue culture. During her early encounters with this newly discovered scientific material, her thinking is pulled toward an event that occurred in 1973. In this year, a girl called Alice, only 11 years old, lay still inside a hospital room, her body invaded and overturned by a primary osteosarcoma lesion (bone cancer). Through the collection of Alice's cells, her energy would not only survive, it would also transform.

Alice's cells were used to establish the Saos-2 cell line. Scientists studying cellular functions use this tissue-specific biological product in routine experiments. Through their commodification into a research material that is routinely used in laboratory investigations, these cells, which once belonged to a girl whose body moved through and felt the world, continue to populate. What this means, is that Alice's cells are replicated, dissected, studied and pulled apart in laboratories all over the world. It is possible that many of the doctors and researchers who observe this material, aren't consciously aware of its embodied origin.

This event: the commodification and replication of cells that once belonged to a living organism, is something that has lingered at the forefront of Kratz's attention. Since those early encounters in 2007, she has spent many long days and nights at IBHI, culturing a cell line derived from Alice. This experience: the repeated action of looking into a microscope and examining the biological conditions of a girl's body that

is there, while at the same time is clearly *not there*, is an event that evoked the conditions from which a string of creative and conceptual possibilities would begin to unfold. These initial encounters have materialised into a series of multi-medium exhibitions. Inspired by Alice, each new creative project re-imagines the biological conditions and experiential effect of this girl's *absent* body.

Exhibited in 2008, the works created for the first instalment of *The Absence of Alice* reconsider fragments of cells and tissue that have been estranged from their corporeal origins. Distributed across television monitors, Perspex plates, and cast and modelled into plaster impressions, this early project thinks through the physical and cerebral, as well as the *absent* conditions of Alice's body. If this is a physicality that is constantly becoming – precisely because of its re-activation inside new surfaces, materials and forms – it is also an organic and spiritual presence that un-becomes at the same time as it continues to emerge.

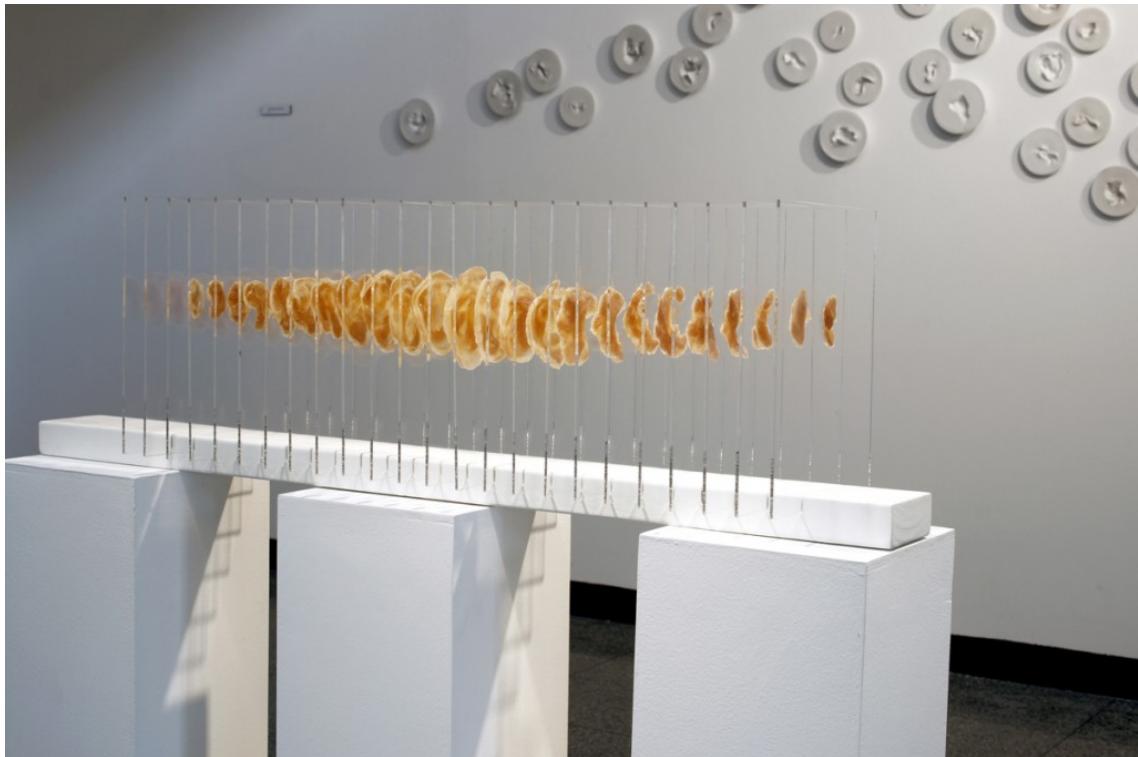
In the works included in this exhibition, I find a body that is re-positioned, both conceptually and spiritually, through a kind of creative cellular redistribution. All around me I interact with fragments of the girl called Alice. On the wall there is a distributed cluster of circular plaster impressions, inspired by the activity of splitting Saos-2 cells. This constellation of sculptural forms, consists of 78 neatly cast circular discs. In the centre of each of these shapes, I interact with an organic trace – visceral marks that I soon learn have been made by creating repetitive impressions of a bone like sculptural form, perhaps inspired by thoughts of Alice. Directly referencing the repetitive, perhaps even mechanical process of splitting Saos-2 cells, the number 78 corresponds to the number of times that Kratz's split Alice's cells during her experiments in the lab at IBHI.



The Absence of Alice, 2008, Installation View

Walking up to *Fragments of a Body in the Process of Becoming*, I move around a series of over twenty square clear-Perspex plates. Displayed on a plinth at waist height, these plates are positioned horizontally and stacked side by side in a row. Each placed about 5 centre meters apart; the entire configuration measures almost a meter in length.

Displayed on each square, I see a flesh coloured circular shape. Not quite symmetrical, the sculptural forms have been made from liquid latex mixed with Saos-2 cells, and have been cast to represent a cell like structure. Starting off small at one end of the sculpture, these shapes increase in size toward the middle of the work, becoming smaller again when they reach the other end. Walking around the sculpture, I see the resonance of a body whose cells have been distributed and left to float in space. Like the Saos-2 cells that have been used to create the material that sculpts the surface of Kratz's work, the shapes I see in front of me echo the traces of a body that tries to be present, just as it transforms. Disembodiment its cultural origins it becomes someone and something else.

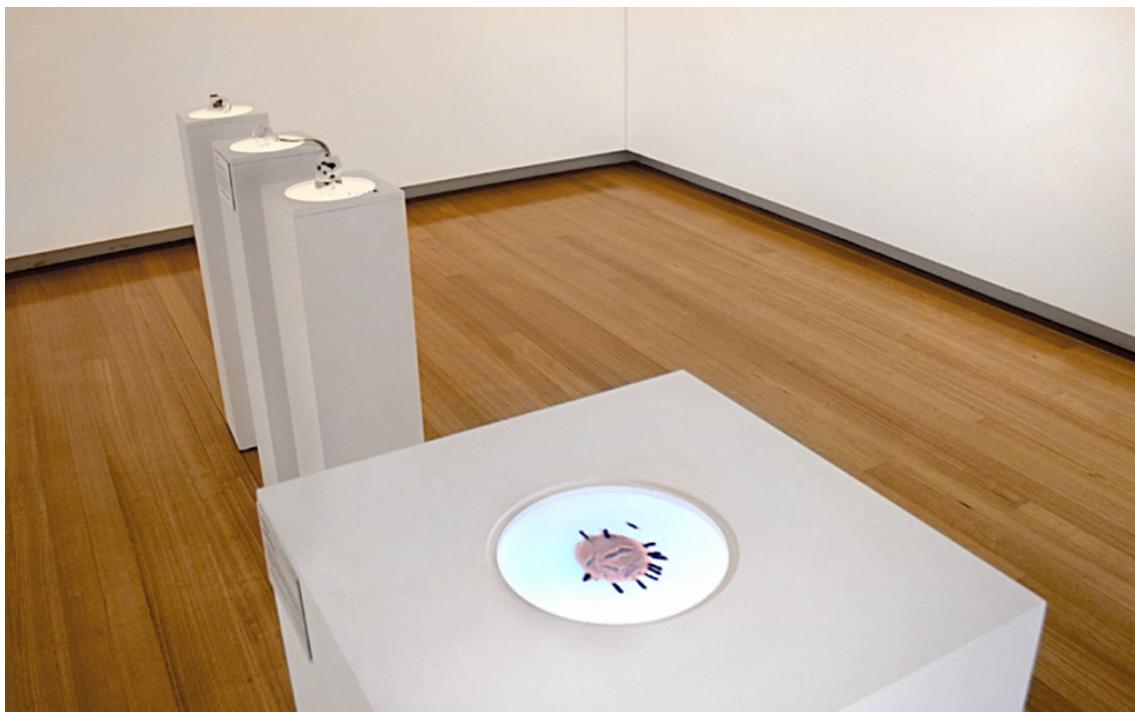


Fragments of A Body in the Process of Becoming Other, 2008, Installation View

For the next five years, the potential that creative practice holds for giving new agency to Alice's body, is something that Kratz continues to explore. In *The Absence of Alice: Alice Ants and the Armyworm* and *The Absence of Alice: Lines of Flight and Self Assemblage* this investigation becomes less anchored in an isolated exploration of the creative potential of scientific methodology, and more concerned with the possibilities that creative practice holds for re-patterning laboratory processes, allowing new experiential and sociological discoveries to begin to emerge. In these new creative explorations, Alice's body is not simply distributed and spatially re-positioned it is also *transformed*: reconfigured through a series of new creative experiences.

Ants are present inside the surfaces of many of the works included in *The Absence of Alice: Alice Ants and the Armyworm*. Over time they grow their colonies inside see through casts of Alice's face, or move across the video sequences created for this new instalment of the project. Projected into tiny circular discs on the top of waist height plinths, I watch the ants eat what appears to be a cellular mixture. On further investigation, I discover that the repeated movements of ants beneath the surfaces of these works, is an

aesthetic device that has emerged from continued scientific experimentation in the lab. In this project, Kratz remains interested in exploring the way that the Saos-2 cells preserve Alice's cellular identity, at the same time they allow her to continue to become. Seeking to discover the way that scientific strategies could be used to illustrate a theory of becoming, Kratz started to co-culture the Saos-2 cells with SF9 insect cells, originally derived from the Fall Armyworm. What happened was something that the artist couldn't have predicted. When co-cultured, the Saos-2 cells were able to survive in environmental conditions that were remarkably different to the ecosystems where they usually thrived. This discovery inspired a new type of creative engagement. What it enabled Kratz to begin to comprehend is that even ideas and bodies that are not fully realised leave echoic resonances that connect to new materials, continuing to transform into new patterns of becoming.



Ants Eating Alice, 2008, Installation View

By distributing and embedding Alice's cells into new surfaces, each with different textures and experiential affects, Kratz continues to unhinge and reconfigure the young girl's story, remaking it inside each new aesthetic and conceptual surface. If Alice is absent, it is because the body of work on show here is a body that no longer belongs to the girl who inspired its conceptual beginnings. Alice's cells are now maintained inside a culture that scientifically encourages them to repopulate and mutate. In a similar way, the *culture* that Kratz works through is a social and creative one, informed by particular discourses, histories, gestures, ways of thinking about, and classifying the world. This is a world that is perceptually activated by the experiences that over a lifetime, have been embedded inside the artist's own limbs, nerve tissue and synaptic pathways. While many of the histories known by Kratz's body come from her interdisciplinary experiences with creative arts practice: experiences which emerge from engagements with materials drawn from visual art, philosophy, cultural theory and creative writing, they also come from her more recent interactions with scientific material.

It is these intersections, between art, science, critical material and life experience, which populate and mutate in Kratz's practice. In doing so, they give shape to a conceptual trail that folds over and connects all of the works in *The Absence of Alice* project. In this trail, we can see the trace of an idea. This is the conceptual realisation that all things are always becoming. This means that every material structure, be it organic or artificial, always has the potential to be disembodied, recast and reborn. This happens every time a body is recorded inside a photograph or medical image, or every time pieces of a person's illness or recovery are examined by science to unfold a new discovery. It is scientific fact the body of the 11-year-old girl who had bone cancer was stilled by illness, and decomposed a long time ago. But it is Kratz's conceptual engagement with this body that reincarnates it inside new creative experiences: artistic investigations that allow Alice's energy to continue to unfold.

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