

The art of hatching chicks

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The Argentine artist Marina Zerbarini, more widely known for her work in electronic art, turned her hand to incubating chicks in a project that sets out the conflict between capitalist modes of production and values of care. It also challenges certain paradigms borrowed from cybernetics that underpinned systems art involving living organisms (such as the concept of interchangeability and replaceability) and the widespread perception of these works – widely repeated by artists and critics in the 1960s and 1970s – as being somehow free of cultural meanings. *Síntesis simbiótica entre un ser vivo y una máquina* (Symbiotic Synthesis Between a Living Being and a Machine, 2010–13) comprises an artificial incubation system for chicks, in which temperature, humidity and ventilation are carefully controlled over a period of 21 days to permit the chicks to grow and hatch.⁶⁶ In the face of the apocalyptic view of machines held by many, Zerbarini explains, she wanted to create an ‘alternative perspective’ and to show how technology may be used to nurture and protect. Her incubator provides a care that is deliberately small-scale, high-quality, and designed for the greatest wellbeing of the chicks, contrasting with the commercial chicken industry, which is focused on high quantities and economies of scale. These contrasts are clearly brought out in the video documenting the work.⁶⁷ Zerbarini’s piece bears similarities to *Chickens Hatching* (1969), one of the first works for which Haacke constructed a system involving live organisms. Both works construct a system of incubators used to hatch chickens from eggs. In *Chickens Hatching*, Haacke intended to exploit the contradictions that would emerge from the framing within a museum of a ‘real-time’ system that is ‘totally immune’ to the additional (cultural) meanings invested in it by that framing.⁶⁸ In seeking to contrast the ‘apolitical’ nature of biological systems with the cultural and ideological determination of human social systems, however,⁶⁹ Haacke ignored the extent to which the control of biological systems is deeply entrenched in the broader dynamics of factory production. To Haacke, ‘The chickens in the museum, naturally, are still the same kind of chickens that would also have been born from these eggs on a chicken farm; and if they are sent to a farm at the end of the exhibition, they are indistinguishable from all other chickens there.’⁷⁰ Zerbarini’s work, in contrast, distinguishes precisely between these kinds of chicken. Haacke aimed to create a system in which the viewer was ‘relegated to the role of witness to a process that would evolve without him’;⁷¹ Zerbarini’s system highlights the role of the artist as carer, and, by extension, the duty of care that falls on all designers and operators of systems for the artificial cultivation and germination of life. *Síntesis simbiótica* is based on a relational ethics of care that responds to the vulnerability or dependency of other beings. An ethics of care differs from a rights-based approach, such as the rights of nature now enshrined in the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia. Care emerges here as a value, but also, importantly, as a practice, something that is repeated with attention to the needs of the other. The ethical and practical dimensions of care are heightened by the development of the work within the domestic space of the artist’s home, together with the honest account given in the video and website documentation of the several failures experienced in hatching the chicks, until the correct conditions were devised. In the context of the commercial production of eggs, where technologies are often deployed solely to maximize profits, *Síntesis simbiótica* reconnects

scientific and technical knowledge with practices of care. It demonstrates the extent to which care may be understood, as Puig de la Bellacasa suggests, 'as a politics of knowledge at the heart of technoscientific, naturecultural worlds'.⁷² For Boff, acknowledging the central importance of care does not mean rejecting all intervention in the world; it means 'renunciar a la sed de poder que reduce todo a objetos desconectados de la subjetividad humana' (renouncing the thirst for power that reduces everything to objects disconnected from human subjectivity) and, crucially, 'organizar el trabajo en sintonía con la naturaleza, sus ritmos y sus indicaciones' (organizing work in tune with nature, its rhythms and cues).⁷³

Chapter Title: Revising systems art: biological time and the ethics of care

Book Title: Decolonizing Science in Latin American Art

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Published by: UCL Press. (2021)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv18kc0mw.11>