



# The bird on the floor

Helen Pynor's bio-art explores life after death

**BY REBECCA GIGGS**

**T**he chicken pieces, sold in a plastic tub in Dresden, were still alive. Earlier, Helen Pynor collected the meat from an over-lit supermarket refrigerator, paying the cashier €2.79. “Fine & Juicy”, read the label, though Pynor had no intention of cooking the cuts. In the laboratories of the Max Planck Institute of Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics, she peeled the cling film off the container, pushed the paper barcode aside, and performed a biopsy on the thigh meat. Images documenting Pynor's labwork show four leg quarters up-tucked in the packaging, pearly, stippled and raw.

What Pynor saw next under the microscope made credible a hypothesis the German biologist Jochen Rink had posed to her three years prior. After slaughter, commercial butchery, chilling and transportation – even after caching in the cold bins of the grocery store, deboned and partitioned – living cells in poultry meat remained prolific. There were thousands. The animal, for eating, had not finished dying. “Fibroblasts!” Pynor dashed in her notes. She set up a camera to record the tiny machinery of the cells, dividing and replicating without a body to sustain. Recently that video played in Pynor's installation *The End Is a Distant Memory*, part of a group exhibition, *The Patient*, at UNSW Galleries in Sydney.

Pynor is one of Australia's premier bio-artists, a job that demands a hybrid skill set of biological wetwork, clinical vocabularies, and a canniness as to the possibilities and limitations of gallery space. The material she orchestrates is fleshly – carcasses, organs, skins and somatic samples – and because flesh turns foul in ways curators and audiences alike find difficult to parse, Pynor also works with video and photography. Her artworks often document performances or processes she has staged, sometimes with collaborators.

In *The End Is a Distant Memory* the microscopy of the entangling chicken cells plays on a table of sand-blasted glass in a dimmed room. On an adjacent wall are two parallel video works: one showing hundreds of jerking farm hens at roost, the other the fluorescent interior of the supermarket. The soundtrack pivots between these scenes so shoppers roll their trolleys through chicken language, and chickens are hushed by plucky muzak streamed out of the delicatessen.

A fibroblast is the kind of cell that is found in connective tissue, active in healing a wound and producing collagen. Go far enough down into any animal muscle and you'll find these sorts of cells gelling, metabolising and splitting. Their perimeter seems fibrous or ruffled. A fibroblast's motion in a culture flask is best described in comparison to other things that stretch and spindle – ice in water, spun sugar. The feeling of watching the fibroblasts needle and fuse approaches sympathy but falls to the side of that word. How to account for a rapport with cells, their unseeing, remnant industry in a now bodiless habitat?

That the meat we buy to consume might be, to a degree, animate speaks to the fallacy of defining death as a physical state rather than as an unfolding process. The border between life and death is, as Pynor puts it, "thick". It's in this zone that she places her work of the past six years, art that touches on themes of organ transplantation and life-support systems. When we meet to discuss *The End Is a Distant Memory*, Pynor relays an experience gathering pig hearts from an abattoir for an earlier

work. (The hearts were kept beating through perfusion for the performance.) She saw other organs continue their function – intestines, for instance, still itching with peristalsis. Grisly, yes, but for Pynor the body is a setting in which dying can happen elsewhere: the shift into lifelessness isn't global but durational. Where legal and clinical criteria draw clear lines, Pynor sees a more textured field. As visible as that texture is in a slaughterhouse, "the life–death ambiguity might be demonstrated somewhere as banal as the supermarket", she notes. Somewhere as banal as inside the fridge.

Walking behind us, three women are discussing a friend who is pregnant. One declares, "She's now become a stomach, nothing but a stomach." The comment slides between sentences, as the verso to what Pynor is saying about death; the body is a place where life is also plural. Our talk wanders to microbes in the human gut, and what might travel with an organ that is medically migrated between two people.

*The End Is a Distant Memory* will next be shown at FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology) in Liverpool, England, followed by the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, before it returns to Australia to tour a number of regional galleries and the Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre in New South Wales. In another component of the installation, a projection shows a single chicken dropped from a height. Though the bird is dead for a moment, its wings outstretch in the updraft and it seems about to glide away from view. Agribusiness has not selected the hen for flight. It lands hard, its plumage fanned back to expose white down. The video was shot so as to be beamed onto the floor. Pynor spent a night stripping the hen of its feathers and photographing it, drawing out the transition of creature to foodstuff. In time, the bird's postures become embryonic, its skin pinks and dimples. Standing over the chicken on the floor, the viewer has a bird's-eye view of this slow attrition, and the violence and strange tenderness it entails.

I ask Pynor what happened to the chicken's body once she had finished the work. She sends me an image of burial in an inner-city parkland dappled with light, behind a graffitied wall. Underground, the chicken's cells now tick with decomposition.

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