

Et in Arcadia Ego

Charlotte Jarvis

10 May - 21 June 2018

Visual artist Charlotte Jarvis has collaborated with Prof. Hans Clevers to grow her own tumour. The tumour was grown in a laboratory from healthy cells harvested from Charlotte's body. The project aims to examine mortality and create a dialogue about cancer.



The project's title is taken from a painting of the same name by Poussin. It depicts four Classical shepherds discovering a stone monument within an idealised Italian landscape. The shepherds are reading the engraving *Et in Arcadia Ego* ("Even in paradise I am here"). The edifice is a tomb, and the first person 'I' who speaks through the inscription is Death. The painting reminds us that Death exists even for perfect beings in a perfect world. It is not just with us, but *part of us*.

While we are built to live for about 80 years, our individual cells have much shorter lifespans. Stem cells allow us to outlive our constituent parts, replacing lost cells with fresh specimens. Yet, every once in a while, a specific mutation in their DNA causes them to start dividing more often, moving around and occupying nearby tissues; they have become cancer cells. Our DNA code consists of three billion letters (a sequence of G, A, T, and C). Stem cells require no more than four changes in this code to turn malignant. Thus, the difference between cancer cells and normal stem cells is minute. It has been exceedingly challenging to design drugs that will kill cancer cells, but leave other cells alone, because malignant tumours are built from our own cells. *Et in Arcadia Ego* indeed.

Collaborator on the project, Prof. Hans Clevers, from the Hubrecht Institute in Utrecht, has proved that it takes only four sequential DNA mutations to convert a normal colon stem cell into a full-blown colon cancer cell. To do this Hans' group replicated the 'natural' process by which healthy cells become cancer cells in the lab. For this project Hans helped Charlotte to replicate this process on her own cells, creating an art work that is biologically part



of her, but grown outside of her body in a laboratory and ultimately exhibited in a gallery. Whilst the mutations carried out on Charlotte's cells are common to all gut cancer, the cells themselves, having derived from Charlotte's body, are distinct to her and as such the art work is potentially lethal to Charlotte, but harmless to anyone else.



The installation comprises two 'sets' facing each other. The first is a waiting room or more accurately, the trope of a waiting room. Screens show abstract snippets of medical procedures, scientific experiments and disembodied parts of a waiting patient. Corkboards display documents including private emails, rectoscopy photos, lab imagery and sketchbook pages. The second space houses a spot lit mound of soil. Atop the earth sits a box – entirely mirrored, inside and out –

creating an illusion of infinite space, within which tiny specks of Charlotte's cancer sit preserved in Ethanol in a petri dish.

The project has been shown throughout Europe but the exhibition at Ort Gallery is its UK debut. Recent funding cuts to the NHS and other support services have made some of the questions raised by the project particularly relevant. The Welfare Reform and Work Bill 2015 cut Employment and Support Allowance by £125 for people with cancer. More recently the widowed parent's allowance drastically cut benefits received by families after the death of a loved one. While these 'austerity measures' affect the whole country, they are particularly devastating in underprivileged communities, of which Birmingham has many, and this makes discussion and debate even more vital.

Another aim of the project is to question the language of cancer. Patients are often described as *battling* or *fighting* cancer. These conflict metaphors suggest that if every patient fought hard enough they would survive. This is clearly not the case. The image of patients fighting cancer also, contradictorily, casts it as the external agent; something alien, so that dying of cancer becomes *both* the fault of the patient *and* the result of something 'other' to their bodies. *Et in Arcadia Ego* questions these metaphors, challenges the idea of cancer as alien to us and helps to initiate discussions about mortality.

Hans writing to Charlotte in 2017:

"I tell the story of our project at scientific meetings and say that you exhibit yourself with your cancer cells. Colleagues walk up to me and say that examples like these are eye openers. We do study cancer as an abstraction, but your art project drives home that the real thing is never far away".

Associated Events:

Exhibition Opening 10 May 6-8pm Free Entry

Death, Faith and Cancer Group Discussion

led by local faith leaders, scholars, medical professionals & hospice clinicians
12 May 2pm Free Entry

"Precious" Family Craft Workshop

led by Jane Thakoordin & Margaret Murray
29 May 2pm Free Entry

both events are in association with BrumYODO, a Birmingham-based community collective whose *A Matter of Life and Death Festival* takes place across Birmingham between 10-26 May.

For more information see www.brummyodo.org.uk



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