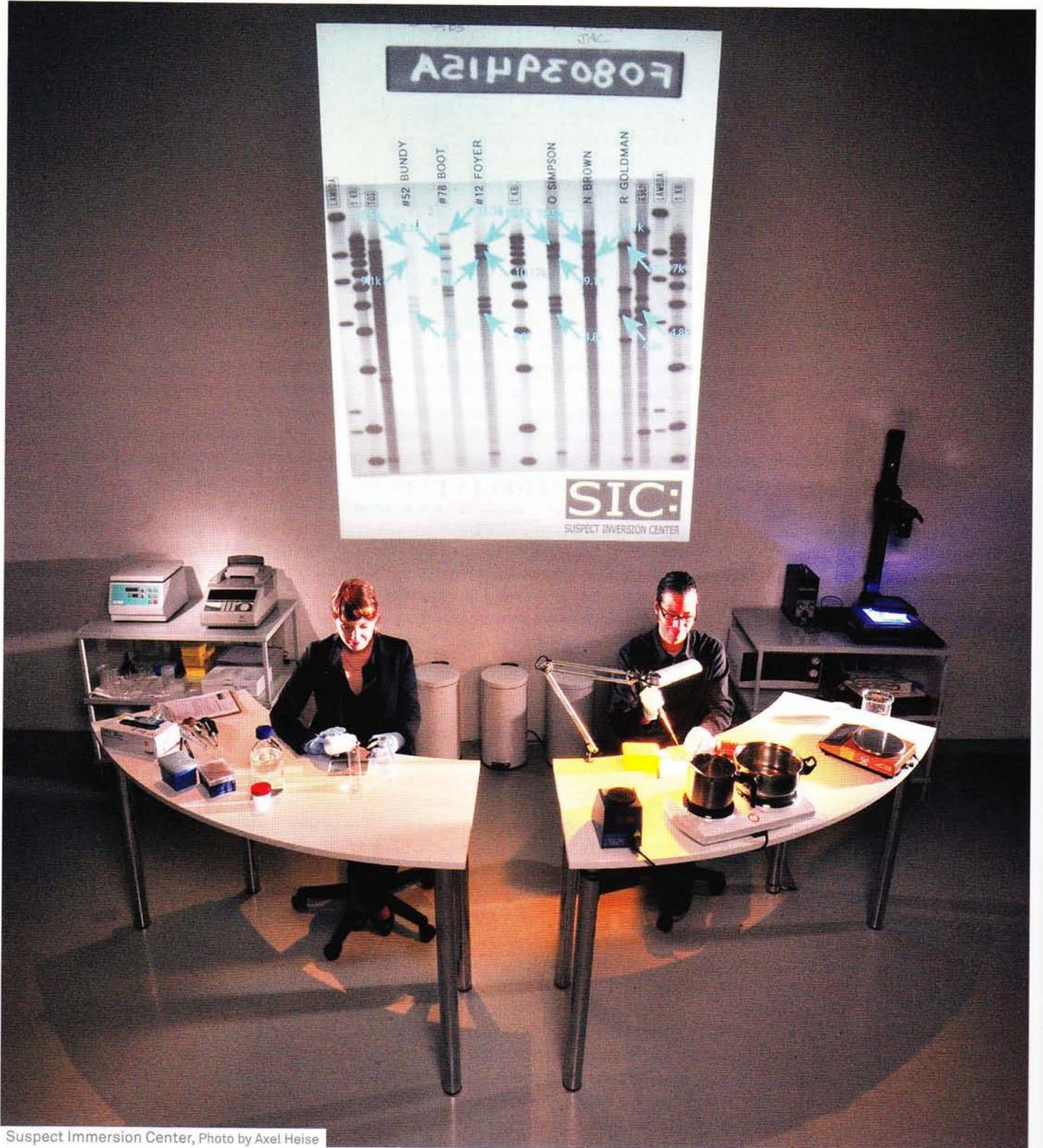
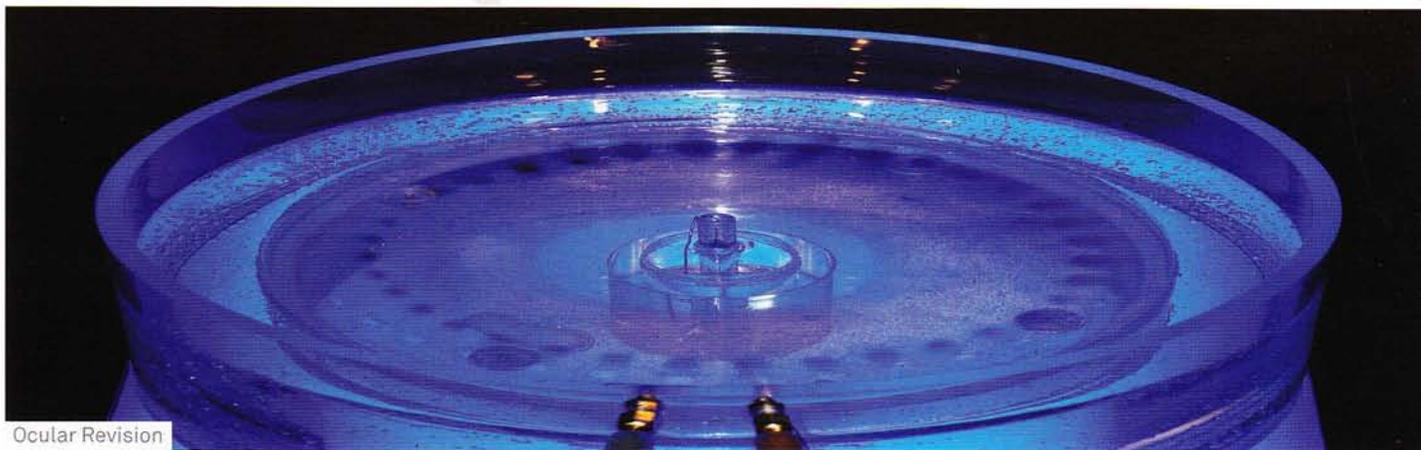


Paul Vanouse

> interview



Suspect Immersion Center, Photo by Axel Heise



Ocular Revision

You use the relatively simple and understandable "gel electrophoresis" technique to isolate DNA. Can we say that you use it as a medium (part of what is called biomedicine)? And if so, what are the rules the medium imposes?

The DNA image is the most culturally authoritative artifact of our era. In the courtroom it is known as the "gold standard" of criminal identification. While an individual witness' testimony or a photographic image might be questioned, DNA evidence is often understood by jurists as "representing one individual to the exclusion of all others." The authority lies in the misconception that the DNA image is a direct, un-mediated impression of a subject, whereas as soon as this becomes a flexible medium of artistic whimsy the authority becomes void. So yes, I am intentionally signaling that DNA is a/(my) "medium" that can be used to create varied types of images. Why I'm so interested in the idea of using electrophoresis and DNA as media of expression is that it forces a material usually referred to as a "subject" to that of a "medium". This being said, the medium does impose some funny rules. While my images sometimes look like ASCII art or bitmap imaging, getting DNA to move at the correct speeds to form images is not so simple. After all, DNA (unlike say human-built media technologies) wasn't created to be a medium of visual representation.

Critic and curator Jens Hauser defined your art

as "pedagogically demystifying." Do you agree with that?

Yes, I agree. For instance, most laypeople don't even realize that the DNA image has to be "produced" by adding enzymes to chop it up and/or primers to reproduce small regions of it, etc. Furthermore, most viewers are surprised about the time dimension of the DNA image—the fact that gel electrophoresis images involve DNA bands slowly moving across the gel, a process typically stopped at an arbitrary point when band differentiation is sufficient. The "Relative Velocity Inscription Device" really altered this process by racing DNA across the entire gel and playfully ascribing meaning to DNA's speed, rather than relative position.

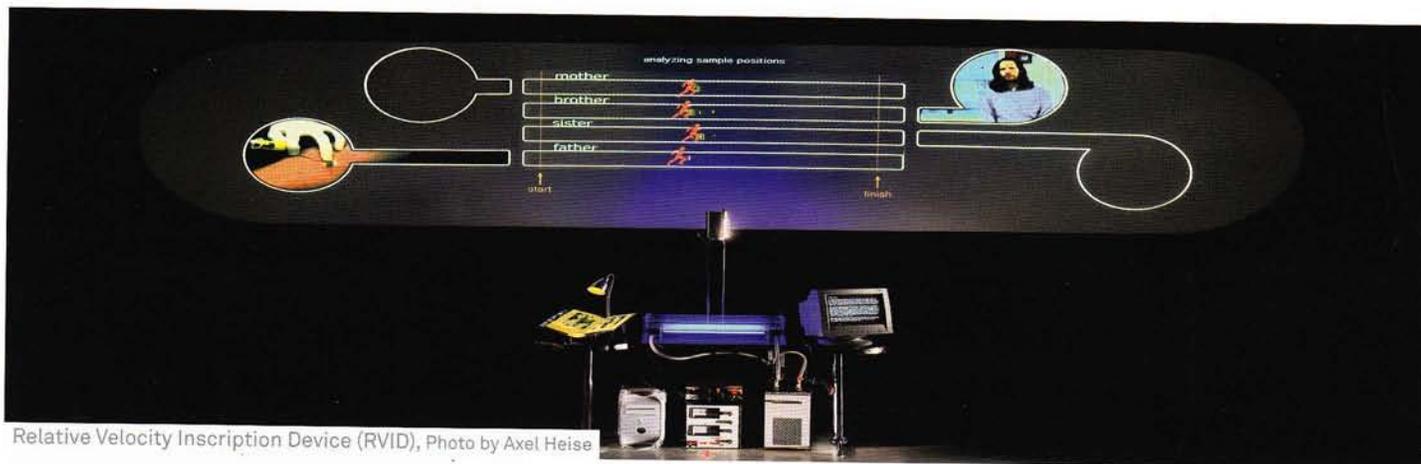
Can you explain me why you defined "DNA fingerprint" as a "misnomer"? And in your opinion what are the main conceptual differences with Francis Galton's original concept of fingerprints?

The term "DNA Fingerprint" is (perhaps deliberately) misleading as it leads one to believe that like a real fingerprint (from a finger) it is a direct impression. It is a misnomer because the DNA fingerprint is anything but direct. We do not have DNA Fingerprints in our cells—they are produced in labs and there are thousands of different procedures that could create such images. The inventor, Alec Jeffries, noted that if he'd have called the procedure by a different name "no one would have given a blind bit of notice". Prosecutors and police like it because juries

understand how real fingerprinting works and assume that DNA Fingerprinting is just a higher tech version. One FBI forensic man noted "...the term' cements in the mind of a jury that we are identifying one individual to the exclusion of all others."

In the collective imaginary, DNA is the ultimate proof of an identity and the repository of our main hereditary (and so almost unavoidable) characteristics. Do you think that "gene fetishism" will become a socially accepted practice as voyeurism (for example) has already become?

Yes, I do. This was also the contention I built into the aforementioned "Relative Velocity Inscription Device" - that increasingly unpopular racial stereotypes would "go molecular", so that rather than demeaning people based on color of skin, racists could demean certain genes. But for the sake of venturing something that is a bit less expected from me, I think in the next couple years there will be lots more scientific research that undermines DNA determinism. For instance, theorist Hanna Landecker, just gave a talk on my campus in which she described varied large-scale "Relational Biology" research projects that examine things such as epigenetics, stem-cell differentiation, bi-directional signaling, etc. - things that I think may dethrone the reductive idea that DNA is the dictator of all things and may loosen the metaphor of life as code.



Relative Velocity Inscription Device (RVID), Photo by Axel Heise

In your artwork "Suspect Inversion Center (S.I.C.)" you built a functional public laboratory where historically significant DNA fragments are reconstructed before visitors' eyes using your own DNA. You also did it for the O.J. Simpson DNA saying that you were "reconstructing and thus effectively deconstructing the entire historical documents." What do you think that DNA represents in the collective imaginary after the Simpson case (as in, for example, the popular expression "it's in my DNA")? And why did you create the acronym S.I.C.?

OK, well the acronym was an anagram meant to hint at the project's functional inversion of the American TV series "C.S.I.: Crime Scene Investigation". The contemporary TV series has given rise to a term called the "CSI effect"—hyperbolic portrayals of the omnipotence of forensic technologies that lead to societal misunderstandings of the science. I think we are misled to the accuracy and omnipotence of these technologies. The 1995 OJ Simpson trial however was the first time that such an abundance of DNA evidence by prosecutors was overturned and thus its effect on viewers was the opposite. It showed the myriad potential flaws in all aspects of the DNA fingerprint, from the evidence chain of custody (e.g. who had the blood samples and when), to the lack of defense team access to the evidence, to the privatization of DNA analysis and cryptic rules of interpretation. I also venture that the success of Simpson's DNA experts, Barry Scheck and Peter Neufeld, at

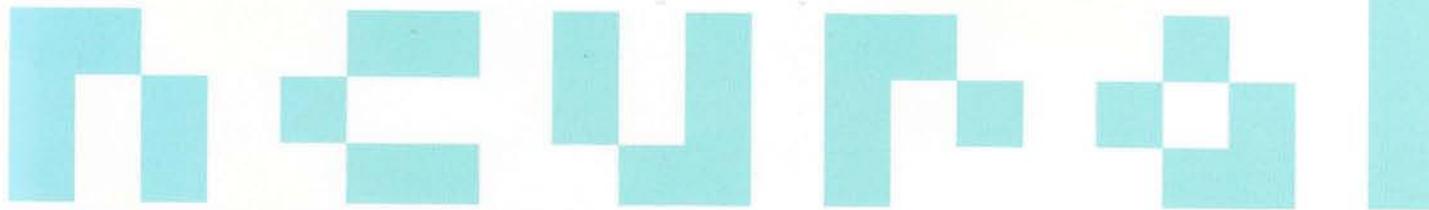
dismantling the prosecutor's DNA claims led directly to their later success in freeing wrongly convicted US death-row inmates, using DNA evidence, in their ongoing "Innocence Project" - one of the most important non profit law projects in the US.

You wrote that DNA is a "cultural construct." Do you mean that it has already entered common sense that lacks the requisite scientific background? What is your opinion of the recent Osama Bin Laden murder, where for the first few days the only proof claimed by USA military forces was the DNA test confirming his identity at 99.9% accuracy? Do you also think that the processes matching DNA through databases can be considered as flawed (and why)?

Well, DNA as "a code" is a cultural construct as it takes a pervasive metaphor of code (in the era of the computer), to describe it. But usually what I refer to as a "cultural construct" in my talks is the "DNA Fingerprint"—since it is quite literally and without any refutation "produced" in a laboratory and is certainly not found in nature. In terms of accuracy of DNA tests it completely depends upon the protocol. I can make a DNA fingerprint in which most people can match or one that differentiates to some degree. There are thousands of variations that fit the definition of DNA Fingerprint, each which will have more or less capacity to differentiate certain individuals. In some of the first cases where people were convicted for DNA matches it turned out that

there were several people in the same town that matched. FBI forensics say their current protocol can differentiate one from 113 billion, but the few less populated FBI state databases that have been tested each have several matching persons out of less than 100,000. In terms of Bin Laden, I don't suspect a conspiracy, but I can't imagine how such statistics were generated. If there was a relative with a very similar DNA band sequence to the person killed then there is a high likelihood that the person killed was a relative. Hopefully the irony is noted here—if you kill someone in their house there is a high likelihood that their DNA will be similar to a relative, but houses are often filled with relatives. You would have to calculate what the likelihood is that there was another relative, son, cousin, etc in the house. Anyway, I'm not doubting whether or not it was Bin Laden they killed, but the DNA stats sound intentionally naïve to population genetics—the field that studies DNA distribution in geographical communities.

In another artwork of yours, "RVID Relative Velocity Inscription Device," you made skin color coding genes from your multi-ethnic family members (of Jamaican descent) perform an absurd race against each other in a gel electrophoresis device to test their "fitness". Here, you are questioning old and nevertheless still popular concepts like "race hybrid as inferiors." Do you think that a decade of scientific statements about the absence of



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