

# **Of Laughing Gas and Fecal Transplants: Self-Experimentation in Science and Art**

**by Gunalan Nadarajan**

The history of science is littered with examples of self-experimentation, ever taunting the sacrosanct principle of scientific objectivity. Sanctorius Sanctorius' dietetic experiments meticulously measuring his own food and excreta over thirty years, Humphrey Davy's delirious adventures testing the effects of laughing gas, Nicolae Minovic who repeatedly hanged himself to develop a forensic understanding of hanging, and Johann Wilhelm Ritter's trials with increasing levels of electrical currents applied to his body – these were all experiments that possibly exemplified a confluence of extreme desperation to prove the validity of one's scientific claims and a willingness to suffer, and even risk death, for one's ideas. After a brief survey of the history of self-experimentation in the sciences, this talk will highlight examples of self-experimentation by artists including Stelarc, Eduardo Kac, Orlan, Marion Laval-Jeantet and the growing number of biohackers who seek to reconfigure their own bodies and processes. The surprising continuities and radical differences between the aesthetics and critical questions that inform artists' self-experimentations and those of scientists will be examined.

## **Brief biographical notes**

Gunalan Nadarajan, an art theorist and curator working at the intersections of art, science and technology, is Dean and Professor at the Penny W. Stamps School of Art and Design at the University of Michigan. His publications include *Ambulations* (2000), *Construction Site* (edited; 2004) and *Contemporary Art in Singapore* (co-authored; 2007), *Place Studies in Art, Media, Science and Technology: Historical Investigations on the Sites and Migration of Knowledge* (co-edited; 2009), *The Handbook of Visual Culture* (co-edited; 2012) and over 100 book chapters, catalogue essays, academic articles and reviews. His writings have also been translated into 16 languages. He has curated many international exhibitions including *Ambulations* (Singapore, 1999), *180KG* (Jogjakarta, 2002), *media\_city* (Seoul, 2002), *Negotiating Spaces* (Auckland, 2004) and *DenseLocal* (Mexico City, 2009) and *Displacements* (Beijing, 2014). He was contributing curator for *Documenta XI* (Kassel, Germany, 2002) and the *Singapore Biennale* (2006) and served on the jury of a number of international exhibitions, like *ISEA2004* (Helsinki / Talinn), *transmediale 05* (Berlin), *ISEA2006* (San Jose) and *Future Everything Festival* (Manchester, 2009). He was Artistic Co-Director of the *Ogaki Biennale 2006*, *Japan and Artistic Director of ISEA2008* (International Symposium on Electronic Art) in Singapore.

He is active in the development of media arts internationally and has previously served on the Board of Directors of the Inter Society for Electronic Art and is on the Advisory Boards of the Database of Virtual Art (Austria), Cellsbutton Festival

(Indonesia) and Arts Future Book series (UK). He serves on the Board of Directors of College Art Association and is on the International Advisory Board of the ArtScience Museum in Singapore. He has also served as an advisor on creative aspects of digital culture to the UNESCO and the Smithsonian Institution. He continues to work on a National Science Foundation funded initiative, Network for Science Engineering, Art and Design, to develop and support a national network for collaborative research, education and creative practice between sciences, engineering, arts and design. In 2004, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Art.

He has served in a variety of academic roles in teaching, academic administration and research for over two decades. Prior to joining University of Michigan, he was Vice Provost for Research and Dean of Graduate Studies at the Maryland Institute College of Arts. He also had previous appointments as Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Studies at the College of Arts and Architecture, Pennsylvania State University and Dean of Visual Arts at the Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore.