

## Democratic Transactions in the Life Sciences

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# Democratic Transactions in the Life Sciences

## A Gender Democratic Labyrinth

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**ABSTRACT** This article presents an artistic and political experiment as an effort to advance democratic transactions in the life sciences. Artists built a 'gender democratic labyrinth' in Maastricht, in which scientists, women's groups, people in general, artists, philosophers, politicians, journalists, clinical geneticists and many others interacted and negotiated on the creation of human embryos for medical-scientific research (a subject kept open in the Dutch Embryo Law of September 2002 to decide within a few years). By taking a gender perspective on the process of democratizing science, we aimed to create a space in which alterity and difference are constitutive elements in the public exchanges on science and technology. The idea to build a labyrinth was theoretically based on the notion of agonistic democracy – in which pluralism is the result of contestations and divisions – and on a notion of science and technology as being contextualized and socialized.

**KEY WORDS** art ♦ citizenship ♦ democracy ♦ democratic spaces ♦ embodied politics ♦ gender ♦ labyrinth ♦ life sciences

That passage from Borges kept me laughing a long time, though not without a certain uneasiness that I found hard to shake off. Perhaps because there arose in its wake the suspicion that there is a worse kind of disorder than that of the incongruous, the linking together of things that are inappropriate; I mean the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the heteroclite; and that word should be taken in its most literal, etymological sense: in such a state, things are 'laid', 'placed', 'arranged' in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a common locus beneath them all. (Foucault, 1966: 9)

Recent developments in the life sciences produce cultural and political transformations that deeply influence the question who or what we are in the present and future. Science and technology have become political actors, whose political significance, already critically discussed by Arendt and Habermas, is larger than the doings of many political professionals and institutions.

Society and individuals, on the other hand, are not 'sub-jects' passively incorporating knowledge and technologies. In the last decades, the life sciences, especially medicine and biology, have become contested areas in which a multitude of actors are involved, ranging from social movements, women's groups, NGOs and journalists to government officials, research councils and private industries. These actors talk, act and negotiate in a large number of public and private spheres. The context in which knowledge is produced speaks back, as Nowotny et al. (2001) state. What does this mean for political negotiation and decision-making processes related to the life sciences? Are actors talking as elements of political and societal associations? Do they insert a plurality of contexts, perspectives and passions into scientific and technological designs? Or are 'we' acting as 'biological citizens', as 'the kinds of people who think of our present and our future in terms of the quality of our individual biological lives and those with whom we identify' (Rose, 2001: 22)? Is it possible to acknowledge adversaries to what Rose calls 'vital politics', e.g. a politics in which biological life itself is at stake?

In this article, an experiment in 'gender democracy' is taken as the starting point for a theoretical exploration of these questions. By taking a gender perspective on the process of democratizing science, we aimed to produce a space in which alterity and difference are constitutive in the transactions on the life sciences. From this perspective, we stressed the options women have to express themselves openly and freely on political issues affecting them. On 14 February 2003, artists built a transaction space, a 'gender democratic labyrinth' in the Bonnefanten library in Maastricht, the Netherlands, in which scientists, women's groups, artists, philosophers, politicians, journalists, geneticists and many other different people interacted and negotiated on the creation of human embryos for medical-scientific research (a subject kept open in the Dutch Embryo Law of 2002 to decide within a few years). Inspired by the theoretical notion of agonistic pluralism (Mouffe, 2000), the notion of the *agora* as a space where science meets and interacts with other agents (Nowotny et al., 2001), and Borges' labyrinthine stories, we created a complex, ramified labyrinth in which a large and diverse number of participants could express their perspectives, feelings and stories.

## THE GENDER DEMOCRATIC LABYRINTH®

The gender democratic labyrinth was designed by Marli Huijer, Irene Janze and Loet Hin as an artistic and political-philosophical event to create a democratic space in which a diversity of sounds, voices, experiences, feelings, identities and embodiments could be expressed on a current subject, i.e. the creation of human embryos. We did not want to reach a feminist consensus on the issue. On the contrary, we intended to open an arena in which a multitude of actors would express their experiences and views. To this aim, we invited a mixture of people: midwives, a rabbi, a professor in genetics and cell biology, a general practitioner, poets, visual artists, painters, a brain researcher, a schoolgirl, the local women's health centre, philosophers in science and technology, a sperm donor, scholars in feminist studies, a specialist in health law, the dean of the health sciences department, medical ethicists, journalists, representatives of interest groups (like women's organizations, the association to protect the unborn child, the association to defend the interests of people with fertility problems, an association involved in developing countries), political parties, a Christian student organization, women with specific experiences (like having a miscarriage), a cartoonist, a cabaret artist and so on.<sup>1</sup> All were asked to express their opinions, truths, feelings or stories about the creation of embryos for medical-scientific research. Participants were free to choose how they wanted to express themselves, for example by giving a speech, telling a personal story, giving a PowerPoint presentation, having a group discussion, interviewing someone else or making a poem or other artistic work.

The University of Maastricht provided us with a vacant building, a centuries-old orphanage, which had been used as the university library until shortly before the event. Artists of the Maastricht Academy of Visual Arts and individual artists transformed the upper floor into a circuit with niches, coffee corners, open areas, meeting points, assembly rooms and isolated rooms. The attic of the building, for example, was constructed as an anatomical theatre by using the library furniture left behind. In the middle of the room stood a conference table with a glass top, through which a brain coupe was projected, thereby reflecting brain tissue on the floor. This work of art, called *Oratorium*, by Krien Clevis (Figure 1) was inspired by the possibility of creating embryos to attain foetal brain cells, to be transplanted into the brain of people suffering from Parkinson's disease. The latter subject was visualized and explained by a brain researcher (Gerard Boer) at another location (Figure 2).

Using old, discarded bookshelves, several niches were constructed in the large side-rooms. The niches were like real-life websites, in which participants could present their point of view in a slot of five minutes or so to an audience gathered around. Tens of people spoke up or expressed

**FIGURE 1**  
*Oratorium* © Krien Clevis.

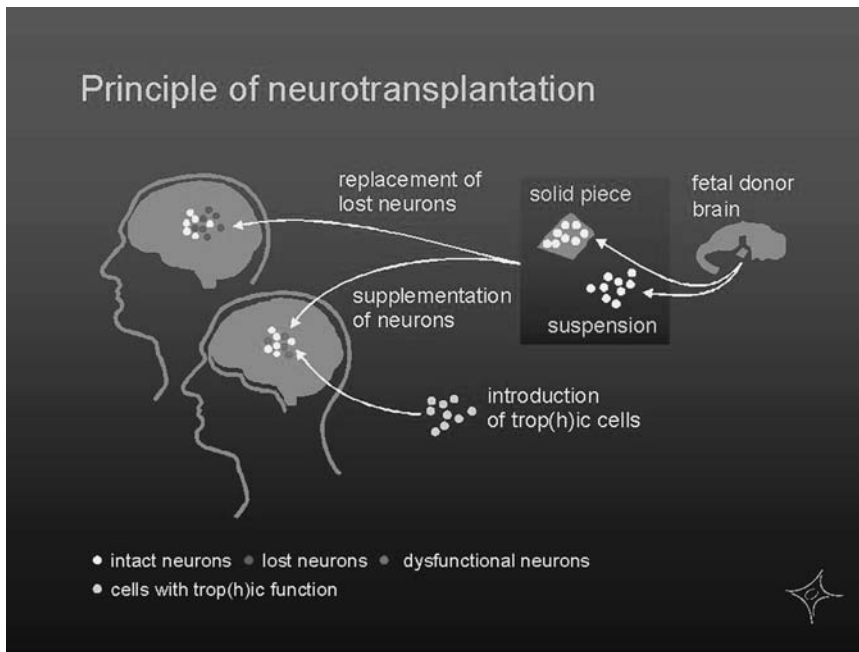


themselves in various ways. In one niche, a poet (Emma Crebolder) recited a poem called 'www.embryo.com'. With one click on the keyboard Mosasaurus is pictured, you are back in the lab, or your files are deleted. In another niche, an expert in genetics and cell biology (Joep Geraedts) told his audience that it is hypocritical to forbid the creation of embryos when the use of spare embryos from IVF is allowed (see Figure 3). A social scientist (Jyotsna Gupta), just back from a visit to India, spoke about the commercial use of egg cells in India, where research on and the selling of egg cells are not institutionally separated: 'Not a thought is given to the fact that the "surplus" eggs are eggs obtained from women who are hyperovulated, sometimes to produce even 20 or more eggs, with all the consequences thereof for their health' (Figure 4).

A feminist philosopher (Klasien Horstman) argued that the women who donate embryonic and foetal tissue be granted control over the material they are asked to provide for scientific, commercial or therapeutic use. Women should mobilize their 'hindering powers'. A journalist of a daily newspaper (Will Gerritsen) tried to convince his audience that discussions on the creation of embryos were *passé*: scientists are already a few steps ahead, they actually want to create human beings. Two midwives (Janneke van Leers and Josien van der Zee) said they were

**FIGURE 2**

**Transplantation of foetal brain tissue, © Gerard J. Boer, Department of Neuroregeneration, Netherlands Institute for Brain Research, Amsterdam.**



intuitively inclined to say 'no' to creating embryos for medical scientific research. Time and again they were amazed at what becomes of an embryo, its growing from foetus to human being. In preparing their talk, however, their opinion had changed. They concluded that if a child can only be cured with the help of embryonic tissue, the use and creation of embryos should be allowed.

There was no room for discussion in the niches. As we aimed at a perpetual movement of people, the 'sites' changed every 20 minutes. New presentations started and visitors had to decide whether to move to another niche or to stay and see the next presentation. From the moment they entered the labyrinth, the visitors had to face the fact that it was impossible to experience all presentations. Taking the one route through the labyrinth always excluded other routes, and thus a number of presentations. Analogous to the concept of a hypertext, there was no key presentation, no index, subtexts or notes. No person, image or narrative was granted centrality. Travelling through the labyrinth, participants and visitors had to compile images and texts in their own ways. For exchanges of experiences and opinions, they were guided to the coffee corners – sort of real-life chat boxes, where people could sit down, have a coffee and

**FIGURE 3**

**Geneticist Joep Geraedts; photography © N. Gelijsteen. With kind permission from J. Geraedts for use of his image.**



participate in the more or less informal discussions purposely set in motion by colleagues and friends.

In addition, works of art were scattered all over the rooms. Among others, there were photos of female torsos representing the objectification of the female body in embryo research (Frank van Helfteren), cartoons about a safe house for failed clones (Figure 5), about scientists who are out of control (Figure 6) and other themes (Monique Mulder), and a video (Wilma van Kempen) displaying arms that fight to control a fragile piece of chalk (as a symbol for the embryo).

A cabaret artist (Hester Macrander), positioned in an isolated room, presented herself as a jukebox, from which the visitors could choose sketches about the reproductive choices women face today. There was room for no more than 20 people, which forced visitors to leave after a few sketches.

An important feature of an experiment is that it is not clear beforehand whether it will fail or succeed. So, observation is needed. During the event, which lasted from noon to 4.00 p.m., five students observed what occurred in the labyrinth. They also interviewed the more than 200 visitors, who were mainly middle aged women, about their opinions on

**FIGURE 4**  
**Social scientist Jyotsna Gupta; photography © N. Gelijsteen. With kind permission from J. Gupta for use of her image.**



the creation of embryos, their expectations of the labyrinth, and, when they left the labyrinth, whether their opinions or feelings had changed. The majority of the visitors felt they left the labyrinth well informed about the diversity of standpoints concerning the creation of embryos, but due to the number of experiences their opinions had not, or not yet, changed. They needed time to reflect, to know what the experience had done to them. Many felt frustrated that they were not allowed to discuss the presentations in the niches. On a scale ranging from one to ten, the average visitor gave the labyrinth an 'eight'.

#### WHY A LABYRINTH?

Labyrinths are both real buildings and metaphors. As building, the word labyrinth appears to be derived from *labyrinthus*, which stresses the nature of the labyrinth as a three-dimensional house, as 'an elaborate and dazzlingly articulated work of art'. As metaphor, labyrinth is connected to the medieval *labor intus*, 'difficulty going in', meaning that it is hard to find what the labyrinth (or maze) hides (Reed Doob, 1990: 95–100).

FIGURE 5  
 'Safe house for failed clones', © Monique Mulder.



Both in the history of architecture and in literature, two main types of labyrinth appear. The most well-known are the ones with a unicursal design, those taking a winding spiral back and forth (Figure 7). This architecture features, for example, in the Greek story of Theseus and the Minotaur at Knossos in Crete. In its most basic form, it is pictured as a clearly defined spiral pathway to and from the centre.

Less well-known is the second, multicursal type of labyrinth, apparently designed to perplex and confuse people. An example is the funeral temple of the Egyptian king Amenemhet III – later to be known as the 'Labyrinth' – built in the 19th century BC (Figure 8). According to the Greek historian Herodotus, who visited the temple in the fifth century BC, it consisted of circa 3000 rooms, both above and below ground, and long

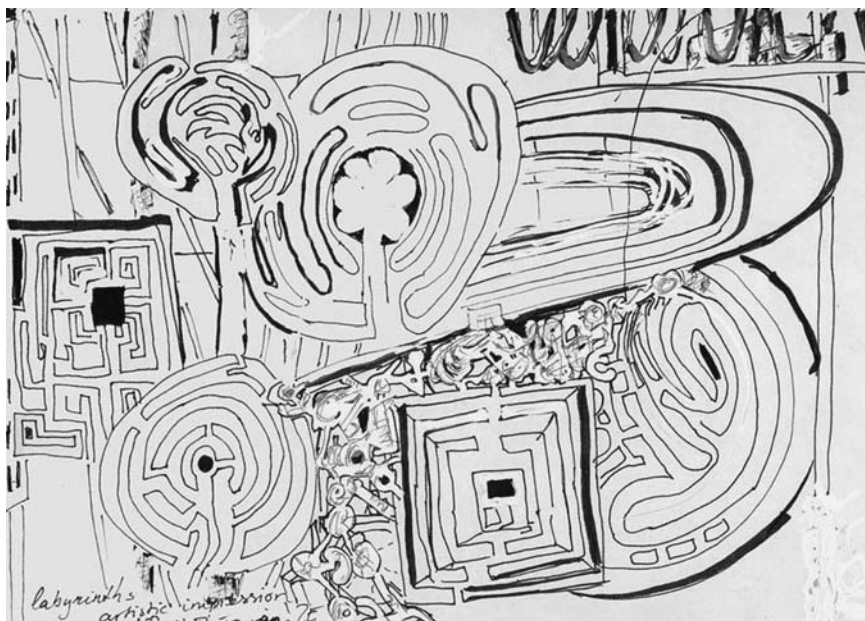
**FIGURE 6**  
**'Ha ha ha, and now we will do Mr. Bos with Mrs. Claessens', © Monique Mulder.**



covered alleys with winding communicating passages, mostly in total darkness. Although the Labyrinth was destroyed long ago, the virtual reality models archaeologists have made provide us with an idea of what it looked like (Shiode and Grajetzki, 2000).

The two types of labyrinths also feature in the stories of Jorge Luis Borges. Next to a well-ordered labyrinth offering a linear path that unfolds in temporal sequence from entrance to centre to exit, Borges depicts a complex, ramified labyrinth without a centre and with no way out. In this way, he juxtaposes a labyrinth organized in temporal sequence with a labyrinth organized in a static way – offering, like a city map, an array of routes (Psarra, 2003: 386). The two labyrinths are opposite poles representing, on the one hand, the quest for truth, perfect order, unambiguity and consensus, and on the other, the attempt to express differences,

FIGURE 7  
lab1.jpeg by Buro jan-Ze; © I. Janze.

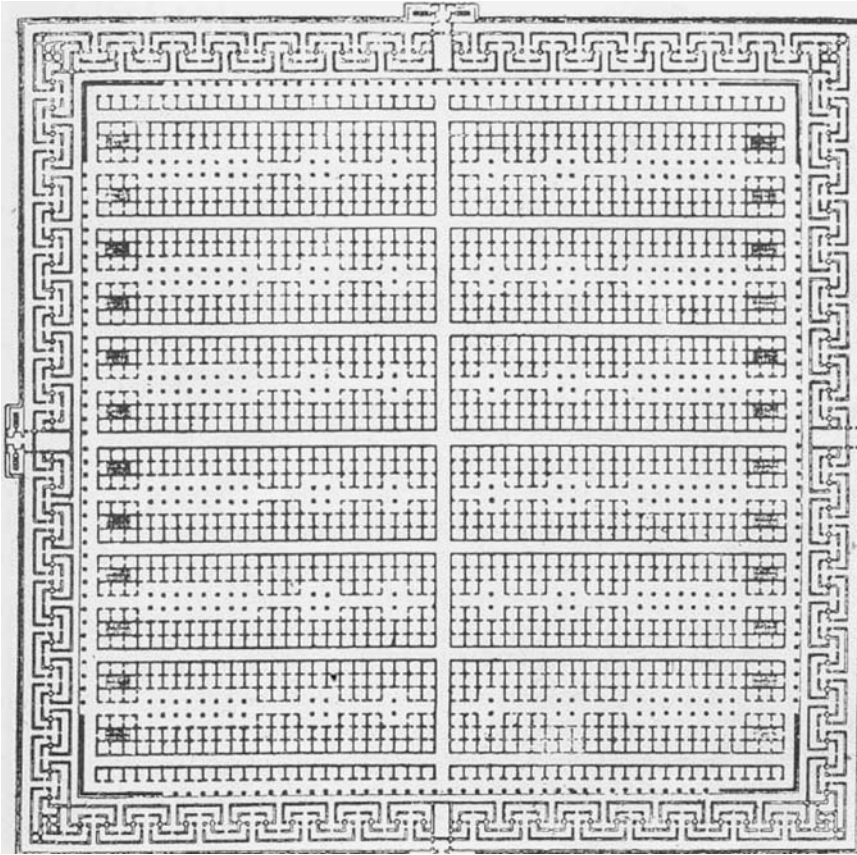


complexity, darkness, secrecy, ambivalence and disorder. The first labyrinth is loaded with western, enlightened, masculine connotations, the second with non-western and feminine elements (Blom, 1996). The first labyrinth confronts the visitor with a single viewpoint, to be met at the centre; the latter poses the visitor with an array of routes and options more to perplex and confuse her or him than to provide them with answers.

In Borges' stories, neither of the labyrinths is without danger. In the first, one runs the risk that all diversity is eradicated, that beliefs lose their colour and sharpness, and become like grains of sand. People are forced to join the truth or consensus found in the centre. In the second labyrinth, the visitor risks being denied any final truth and getting lost in diversity and chaos.<sup>2</sup> In his stories, Borges presents us heterotopias, according to Foucault, which disturb and undermine the possibility of a common language, a common grammar, because they shatter or entangle common names (Foucault, 1966: 9).

The gender democratic labyrinth we designed was like the complex Egyptian labyrinth. Our aim was to stage a confrontation among a plurality of values and knowledges, rather than to create a situation in which the right answer or a consensus would be reached. Although the participants got a map at the beginning of the labyrinth, the simultaneity of

**FIGURE 8**  
**Plan of temple labyrinth for Amenemhet III (Hitching, 1978: 154).**



presentations (five presentations were taking place at any one time), the incompatibility of the knowledge and beliefs expressed, the mix of stories and argumentation, the multitude of artworks and the many rooms, stairs and niches one could visit, made the labyrinth a complex and confusing experience. As we discuss later, experiencing confusion about one's position, opinion and even identity might be a way to transcend rigid positions and the antagonism inherent to them.

## THEORETICAL NOTIONS

The idea to build a labyrinth to make room for dissent and contestation was theoretically based in:

1. The notion of agonistic pluralism, stressing agonism – and not antagonism – as a guarantee for pluralism and as a vital condition to democracy.
2. The notion of contextualization of science articulated as science entering the *agora*.

### *Agonistic Pluralism*

By creating a labyrinth, we intended to emphasize the pluralism of values, voices, feelings and passions surfacing in relation to the innovations in the life sciences – the creation of embryos for medical-scientific research, for example. Taking account of the undecidability, inherent to the ethics and politics of embryo research since its start in the 1970s, we felt it important to stress the conceptual impossibility of reconciliation between the values, emotions and voices at stake. We did not plan to arrive at a consensus between scientists and other actors on the political or moral framework within which embryo research is or is not permitted, as is the case in face-to-face consensus conferences or citizen panels, in which a cross-section of a country's general public hears the testimony of various experts and interested parties and drafts the framework within which their political representatives can then make policy.

In line with Chantal Mouffe's observation that consensus can only be arrived at by exclusion and that agonistic confrontation is the very condition of democracy, we designed an agonistic space in which values, knowledges and emotions usually excluded from the scientific discourse confronted the stabilized, 'black boxed' discourses of life scientists and bioethicists. Accepting that relations of power are constitutive for the social and the scientific, we did not want to eliminate power relations (for example, by downgrading the status of experts and upgrading the status of non-experts, or by hiding the participants' identity). Instead, we planned to constitute a confrontation in which power relations were more attuned to democratic values. In this, we chose to pay special attention to women's perspectives and gender aspects. We intended to offer women the option to speak openly and freely – to practise *parrèsia* in the words of Foucault (1989) – about a current and political issue that will in the near future affect them. The close link of embryo research to the design of techniques to assist women in the process of reproduction stresses the importance of women being involved in the debates.

Women, especially in the Netherlands, are underrepresented in the bioscience practices, in bioindustry and in all political and ethical organizations governing the implications of the life sciences (Bosch, 2002; Portegijs et al., 2002). Consequently, they are not actively involved in the design of gender that they must bear (Harding, 1991), nor in the design of democracy that they must inhabit. Pregnant bodies, or bodies donating egg cells

and embryos, are not gender-neutral systems. Bodies are 'gendered' sites where knowledge of genes, foetuses, reproductive processes, biomedicine and politics converge (Ettore, 2002). Male speakers appear to be much more concerned about human embryos than about women, as Mulkay affirmed in his study on the embryo research debate in the UK (Mulkay, 1997). Women's engagement in embryo research (as donors of egg cells and embryos), their participation in research practices and the consequences for women of new technologies, receive little attention in public spheres. Feminist philosophers and social scientists have extensively studied gender aspects related to the life sciences, but the results of these studies materialize only very slowly in biological and democratic discourses and practices (Keller, 2001). From the introduction of IVF in the Netherlands, we learn that feminist politics is not very effective if reaching a feminist consensus is perceived as a precondition for entering the public arena (Kirejczyk, 1996).

The gender democratic labyrinth was intended to be an agonistic space in which scientists and other actors could meet as *adversaries*, as friendly enemies. The aim of adversaries is not to express and add to their antagonism, as enemies do, nor to exclude all differences and reach consensus as friends often do, but to mobilize differences and conflicts towards new democratic designs. As Mouffe emphasizes:

Envisaged from the perspective of 'agonistic pluralism' the aim of democratic politics is to transform *antagonism* into *agonism*. This requires providing channels through which collective passions will be given ways to express themselves over issues which, while allowing enough possibility for identification, will not construct the opponent as an enemy but as an adversary. An important difference with the model of 'deliberative democracy' is that for 'agonistic pluralism', the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilise those passions towards democratic designs. (Mouffe, 2000: 103)

According to Mouffe, taking pluralism seriously requires that we give up the dream of a rational consensus. Conflict and division are inherent to politics – to feminist politics also. Rather than eliminating conflicts and diversity of opinions, we should attempt to create new shared life forms and democratic spaces that make room for the multiplicity of democratic demands. Connected to the innovations in the life sciences, this implies acknowledging the contemporary co-production, or co-construction, of science and society – which brings us to the second theoretical notion, the idea of a contemporary *agora* as a transaction space where scientists and non-scientists meet.

*Science Entering the Agora*

The gender democratic labyrinth was set up to meet the new relationships between science and society as described by Nowotny et al. (2001) in *Re-Thinking Science: Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty*. They affirm that science and society are increasingly transgressing the line that formerly demarcated them. As a result, a contextualization and socialization of science has occurred, as well as a scientification of society. A transition has taken place from a 'Mode-1 society', in which knowledge is produced within an academic, hierarchical, discipline-based context focused on explaining and predicting phenomena, to a 'Mode-2 society', characterized by a growing complexity and uncertainty, the production of various knowledges and the lack of plain cause-effect patterns. In the 'Mode-2 society', the number of people involved in research has grown, the definition of what counts as science is stretched out, and – rather than producing one truth in one context, i.e. the academy – a plurality of knowledges is produced in a diversity of contexts.

The double movement from science to society and vice versa has led to the concept of the knowledge society, or technological culture, in which the boundaries between science, politics, economy and culture are blurred to the extent that science has lost its monopoly on truth, and politics has lost its authority on the definition of the good life. Politics, in the sense of finding answers to the question of the good life, is also made in laboratories and on drawing tables – that is, inside the 'hard cognitive core' of science and technology. Science, in the sense of producing knowledge, in its turn, is also made in non-scientific contexts. 'Not only the research agendas but also the substance of scientific inquiry can be reshaped by issues originally raised outside the research system' (Nowotny et al., 2001: 214). Though anti-egalitarian tendencies are not gone, expertise has become socially distributed.

This is especially true for the life sciences. Since the late 1980s, a growing number of actors are actively participating in bioscientific and technological innovations and implementations. Biotech firms, pharmaceutical companies, ICT concerns, corporate investments, research councils, foresight organizations, government officials, patient self-help groups, interest groups, NGOs, environmental organizations, journalists, women's groups and others initiate and generate innovations and transformations in the life sciences. The feminist movement, for example, has convincingly criticized the objectivity and neutrality of science and has brought in alternative research projects. Consequently, taking account of gender dimensions has become routine in many biomedical research practices. Biologists, in their turn, are increasingly entering public and political spheres to give account of their doings. Transaction spaces have been created in which scientists and other actors exchange something.

Society is able to speak to science. This contextualization can produce consensus or public agreement, but also public contestation, controversy and conflict. Scientists should not fear the latter. To the contrary:

... they are a sign of a healthy body politic and part of the process of democratisation that also affects science. Space has to be made for the discussion of what people want, what their needs are and how even contradictory responses and claims can become better incorporated into the interactive dynamics of exchange between knowledge being produced and the social context in which it occurs. (Nowotny et al., 2001: 258)

Although 'body politic' is a well-known word in feminist discourse (referring both to the political technologies governing the gendered body and to a politics starting in the gendered body), it is probably more adequate to use the word 'embodied politics'. Contestations related to corporeal experiences of gendered individuals are brought into the *agora*, and become incorporated into the political exchanges on science and technology.

Nowotny et al.'s portrayal of the 'Mode-2 society' is labyrinthine: in the 'Mode-2 society' all connections are provisional. There is no centre, and thus no final truth; all rooms, niches, knowledges, centres and demarcations are continually shaped and reshaped, located and relocated. Maybe to visitors' relief, the labyrinth we constructed had an information desk and an exit, allowing people to retreat from the transaction space.

#### ACKNOWLEDGING ADVERSARIES TO VITAL POLITICS?

Is it not naive to think that designing labyrinths or other democratic transaction spaces will have any effect on the 'black boxed', hegemonic political and scientific regimes that govern our present? Notions like the labyrinth or the 'Mode-2 society' cannot mask the fact that we have entered an age of vital politics, in which life itself has become the overriding responsibility and criterion that guides politics. This question becomes the more relevant, since the political will to health, described by Foucault (1977) as biopolitics, has reached a molecular level. It has become molecular politics, *pace* Rose (2001). The desire to maximize the quality of our individual biological life and of those we identify with is materialized into the smallest particles of our existence. Citizens as well as organizations are urged to take an active role in securing their individual well-being and the well-being of the ones they are attached to. Women, as the main caretakers, are particularly addressed. Moreover, the 'will to health' has become intertwined with prevailing technologies of the self. Biopower merges with 'ethopolitics', a politics concerned with the ethos of human existence, with 'the self-techniques by which human

beings should judge themselves and act upon themselves to make themselves better than they are' (Rose, 2001: 18). In this process, new relations between body and self are established. As a result, human beings are increasingly coming to understand themselves, their subjectivity, in somatic terms – 'corporeality has become one of the most important sites for ethical judgements and techniques' (Novas and Rose, 2000). From Rose's perspective, the complexity and uncertainty of the 'Mode-2 society' can only be understood as a capillarization of the new 'will to health'. No individual or action can escape from molecular politics. As Rose affirms:

This new 'will to health' is increasingly capitalised by enterprises ranging from the pharmaceutical companies to food retailers. And a whole range of pressure groups, campaigning organisations, self-help groups have come to occupy the space of desires, anxieties, disappointments and ailments between the will to health and the experience of its absence. Within this complex network of forces and images, the health-related aspirations and conduct of individuals is governed 'at a distance', by shaping the ways they understand and enact their own freedom. (Rose, 2001: 6)

The notion of molecular politics is to be understood within the tradition of governmentality studies, in which – often at a micro-political level – the numerous technologies governing our present are explored. Within this view, all techniques individuals use to judge, govern or shape themselves are framed within the imperatives of molecular politics. Analogous to the architecture of the first, well-ordered labyrinth, all human actions are understood as being governed by vital politics. Citizenship equals biological citizenship. Vital politics is a (body) politics without adversaries.

In this sense, Rose's analysis counters Mouffe's. Both accept that power is constitutive of the social as well as of the self. However, where Rose subsequently stresses the merging of vital politics with the prevailing self-techniques, Mouffe acknowledges a distinction between 'politics', which 'consists in domesticating hostility and trying to defuse the potential antagonism that exists in human relations', and 'the political', which refers to 'the dimension of antagonism inherent in human relations, antagonism that can take many forms and emerge in many different types of social relations' (Mouffe, 2000: 101). 'The political' is continually challenging 'politics'. According to Mouffe, the main question for democratic politics is how to constitute forms of power more compatible with democratic values. Within the scope of this article, this question is reformulated as: how to acknowledge 'the political' as an adversary, a legitimate enemy, to 'vital politics'? Instead of giving up all opportunities to democratize contemporary bioscientific and biotechnological culture, which in the end would mean to accept molecular politics as a stabilization of biopolitics, we accepted Mouffe's view of agonistic confrontations among adversaries

as the very condition of democracy's existence. We used her proposal to stage a confrontation around diverse conceptions of citizenship (liberal-conservative, social-democratic, neoliberal, radical democratic and so on), to organize a confrontation between citizens from a broad range of disciplines, identifying with the embryo, nature, women as donors of embryonic material, Jewish laws, the pregnant woman and so on. Instead of eliminating passions, we tried to mobilize them and create a confrontation between the grammars of a great variety of citizens and of scientists and bioethicists. The labyrinth was designed as an agonistic public space in which a confrontation was staged between scientific, democratic, feminist, economic and individual adversaries, and in which experiences of oneself – one's identity and political and ethical positions – were at risk, rather than being governed.

## DISCUSSION

Did the gender democratic labyrinth succeed in organizing an agonistic pluralism? Many participants (experts and non-experts) expressed feelings of anger, frustration, enthusiasm or surprise:

Do those old-fashioned ideas still exist?  
I felt offended when someone asked me why I didn't adopt a child.  
I didn't know it was already possible to use embryonic cells.  
We never before discussed this issue. (The midwives)

I felt terribly embarrassed to stand next to an anti-abortion person. (A historian who presented the 16th-century view of a Catholic anatomist who considered the foetus not to be a human being because it was not yet inspired by the Holy Spirit)

There was a heterogeneity of opinions, views, stories and representations, now and then leading to agonism – certainly not to antagonism. At first glance, peace predominated. Contestations, however, surfaced in the incompatibility of the participants' expressions. The embodied experiences of a woman who lost her unborn child in the sixth month of pregnancy (she foresaw the bad luck in her dreams, and wondered what dreams scientists creating embryos would have) confronted the story of the brain researcher who focused on the benefit embryonic cells would bring to patients with Parkinson's disease. Many other participants expressed embodied experiences of fertility, IVF, pregnancy, childbirth and parenthood in talks, images, paintings, poems and sculptures. Although a number of scientists considered these expressions as being old-fashioned, they had to face the fact that embodied experiences do play a role in exchanges on science and technology.

**FIGURE 9**  
**Panoramic view of the labyrinth; photography © N. Gelijsteen.**



Some stories or arguments were attributed more importance than others, without anyone questioning it. In a few instances, Mr Somebody (to use Latour's phrase) got a larger audience than Mrs Anybody. Mr Somebody's information, like the information the brain researcher provided about the use of foetal cells, was taken more seriously than the information of the general practitioner who told her audience that embryo research hardly plays a role in the daily medical practice. Confronting the stabilized, 'black boxed' discourses on embryo research is not an easy case, as feminist scholars know for long. We tried to prevent the dominance of Mr(s) Somebody by constructing the labyrinth over several levels (see Figures 9 and 10).

Attic rooms, small bay windows, wide and narrow passages, large and small niches, isolated rooms and open rooms alternated. The presentations were orchestrated in time and place in order to synchronize each time a variety of perspectives. However, we could not stop the university professors from stumbling on each other and starting a conversation on their own, inaccessible to other labyrinthians. The same holds for the fact that some sites were more crowded than others.

Does the labyrinth lose its worth, when it does not immediately succeed in confronting stabilized consensus and knowledge regimes and in producing agonistic pluralism? We don't think so. Surfacing the unstable

**FIGURE 10**  
**Spiralling staircase; photography © N. Gelijsteen.**



and chaotic forces that have been excluded, but still constitute the backdrop – or hypertext – of stabilized languages and tuning in a plurality of perspectives, contexts and feelings is a difficult task requiring tenacity, ingenuity and time.

In concreto, the labyrinth resulted in articles in the media (among others a half page in the free journal *Metro*); in the sale of the cartoons – now permanently exhibited in the Department of Genetics and Cell Biology at the University of Maastricht; and in proposals by others to replicate the labyrinth. We must admit that it is hard, maybe impossible, to tell what the exact effects are of a democratic experiment in which a heterogeneity of people meet as adversaries to confront innovations in science and technology. As an attempt to organize an agonistic confrontation, we think the gender democratic labyrinth is an interesting and exemplary effort to keep democratic contestation alive.

## NOTES

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1. People invited, but not willing or able to come were: Turkish and Moroccan women's organizations (as replacement we interviewed them, visitors could listen to the audiotapes), an imam (due to the fact that the labyrinth took place on a Friday and in a week of religious festivities), the gynaecologists of the University of Maastricht ('insufficient support in the group for the subject'), biotech companies ('we have not yet developed our ethical stance on this issue'), the pharmaceutical industry (idem), an association of Catholic women, a television presenter (too busy), the Parkinson patient organization (unable to come), workers in an abortion clinic (too precarious), Women on Waves (idem) and many others. We succeeded in including participants from both sexes, aged 16–65, from a range of disciplines and societal and religious organizations. We did not succeed in including participants from various ethnic backgrounds. Maastricht is a rather mono-cultural city. The ethnic groups we approached were interested in the subject but did not want to present their perspectives in public.
2. Borges describes the dangers of the two labyrinths in 'The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths'. He starts with the labyrinth of the king of Babylon. It is so complex and ramified that a visiting Arabian king has to wander for hours before he finally finds the way out. The Arabian king feels offended and decides to ask the Babylonian king to his own labyrinth. This second – well-ordered – labyrinth, made by the Arabian king, is built by destroying the kingdoms of Babylon, razing the castles to the ground and taking the king into custody. The labyrinth constructed is an empty desert, without walls, passages, doors and stairs. The king of Babylon is released into this labyrinth. He dies of starvation and thirst.

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