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BODY of KNOWLEDGE

Art as Embodied Evolution

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As Varela and Maturana have noted, “life” is characterized by its dynamic, autopoietic qualities. The totality of life on Earth constitutes a planetary-wide body that continually morphs and self-generates in time. Just as living systems are inherently process-oriented, so in the art+science practice I have developed over the past decade at the Institute For Figuring, a primary concern has been to produce aesthetic projects which evolve through dynamic embodied engagement brought about by communities of people. The artworks we create at the IFF – such as our Crochet Coral Reef and our fractal origami projects – all begin from humble material seeds (a crochet hook and a ball of yarn, or a stack of business cards), whose structures are allowed to evolve under the influence of simple algorithms enacted by many participating contributors. Our Crochet Coral Reef has now engaged nearly ten thousand women in a dozen countries on five continents and constitutes one of the largest, longest-running participatory art+science endeavors in the world. These projects are open-ended experiments in which surprisingly complex forms emerge, demonstrating through material craft practice insights of complexity theory that now inform our thinking about life. Here, acts of making become the driver for vast unexpected taxonomies of form that parallel the development of life itself and which collectively constitute bodies of knowledge realized in mediums such as yarn. In this talk I will discuss the IFF’s practice at the intersection of art, science and craft, with particular attention to the interplay between material and form that begins to develop when one opens up a project to the generative space of community engagement.