PlantBot Genetics is a collaboration between Wendy DesChene (Canada) and Jeff Schmuki (USA) that focus on the ethics of current food production and distribution systems. PlantBot Genetics Inc., is a parody of the Monsanto Corporation, engages and motivates unsuspecting audiences in considering the food they eat, how it arrives on their plates and other environmentally related issues. Since 2009, their robot-plant focused company satirically comments on the aggressive and misleading practices of biotech firms. Bizarre products and use of unexpected street based locations emphasize the ridiculousness of actual biotech products through associated graphics, product descriptions, and marketing techniques. PlantBots couple interdisciplinary art practices and blur the lines among object making, performance, political activism, community organizing, and environmentalism. This participatory art flourishes free of gallery and museum systems that work to separate audiences and artists. Instead, this art form is steeped in the community created by the audience in collaboration with artists and scientists.

W – Jeff why do you think collaboration/interaction/engagement with audiences in your work is important?

J – My first public works or interventions were a bit scary. I wasn’t certain how people would react. I began as quietly as I could, just walking my portable gardens in the street. Over time, I realized people were very curious and friendly. Why is this guy towing a tube growing collards? We would begin a conversation about self-reliance and climate change, personal action, and the dinner table. Confidence to wander into private businesses took hold, and when encountering stressful situations, I would be asked to leave, and I would gracefully comply. Engagement with audiences through art opens possibilities to demonstrate the fragile connection between the natural world and personal action. Our actions all add up, they matter. In most cases the art becomes secondary to the conversations. These dialogues instill confidence in the audience offer simple positive changes that can be enacted long after we have moved on to the next event.

W - Did you ever think your primary method of working would be through collaboration?

J - I have always been open to collaboration, but I wasn’t formally trained in it. Having many brothers and sisters, I learned how to work in a group very early. As a student, I was very politically engaged with student government and even lobbied in Washington DC for student issues. My background in ceramics extended the art experience into an individual method of working although ceramics is very communal, the field has not taken full advantage of the possibilities. I have always been critical of the limitations imposed upon ceramics. A dinner party with friends at a table full of handmade dishes is clichéd and rather limited in scope.

W – What changed that for you?
Hurricane Katrina swept through Mississippi and destroyed my life. I was asking for a change but had no idea what that would mean. I lost my house, studio, artwork along with my professorship. Luckily art institutions, museums, and schools stepped in to help. I was on the road and always moving from location to location and was unanchored. Working in ceramics requires that you have kilns and other equipment that wasn’t appropriate for the nomadic existence that became my life. This new homelessness forced me to re-think and be open to what it meant to be an artist.

J - When we met you seemed to understand a type of collaborative way of working already. How did you get there from your background as a painter? That appears to be a significant leap as well.

W – Well, I didn’t have a traumatic life re-design like you. In someway I came to this method of working in a gentler way, but I have always thought painting was extremely limiting to how ideas might be expressed. I graduated from a well-respected painting program where my peers spent a lot of time steeped in the narrow history of painting. A lot of effort in the painting world was spent making intellectualized paintings that only a few other highly trained painters or historians would understand. Those conversations, although fun, were limiting. I wanted to make art that took on more responsibility and could have a broader impact. I challenged myself in graduate school at Tyler to create an artwork that a highly trained painter with my background could reference and respect but could also provide an equaling engaged art experience for a small child. I questioned if the value could be found in one type of experience why couldn’t it also be found in another. In this logic value is a flexible commodity and can provide pliable experiences to people of different backgrounds. Once I made the decision that the point of my art should form adaptable experiences, it made a lot of sense to start creating in other more inclusive medias.

J - Was the transition from painting on a flat colored square to collaborating with the audience smooth?

W - Collaboration seemed to make so much sense conceptually, but I didn’t start there immediately. In graduate school, my thesis was a painting that was painted to fit the space like “JAMES ROSENQUIST: F-111”. I reasoned that the audience would have a greater connection to the work if it were thought of as an immersive pictorial plane. I wanted to move from the square. I used imagery that deconstructed "cute," and paired it visually with American painting giants like Barnette Newman’s painting “Voice of Fire”. The cute parameters, illusions, and colors allowed it to have multiple experiences but, in the end, the audiences experiences although immersive were still passive and I was very much confined to the “square,” as the gallery was full of square/rectangular walls that created another kind of box. It wasn’t until after graduate school when I realized that the audience needed to be a part of the art experience to create the most impact. The result of that thinking was my first truly collaborative project that toured for ten years called WYSIWYG.
W – In 2009 when we met, you had a project called “Portable Gardens,” do you think that was your first successful collaborative project?

J – Before Hurricane Katrina I was a studio artist, quietly making ceramic sculptures that were meditative and introspective. I also had a garden that was wonderful. After the disaster, I saw the best and worst of desperate people. I remember a few months later coming upon small food gardens constructed from debris and growing what was available. People were doing their best to overcome what was dealt them, some of the gardens were abandoned, and others were lovingly tended to. These "armagarddens" made an enormous impression on me, living off canned food without labels and other things I could scavenge or given to me by others. I missed my previous life; I missed my garden and felt powerless. On the road, I began growing small gardens that could be gallery based or wheeled about in public space. Soon I was asking folks if there knew where their food came from, who grew it, what was in or on it, and why it needed to travel hundreds of miles to arrive where it could easily be produced. The victory garden became a platform and my portable gardens the first type of collaboration with public spaces and people.

W – So your work took a political turn. Why do you think politics and collaborative art makes sense as a working method for you?

J – Without community, you will often have a difficult time of life. It took a catastrophe to teach me this. When I share some of what I learned about overcoming the odds and beginning from zero, it can’t help but become political. I did not survive alone without assistance. What happens to you also happens to another, so teaming up can ensure more than survival, with various strengths and talents at hand, the community is more resilient and stable. Collaborative art builds community and with a community, everyone has a chance.

J - Before we worked together your work was getting more political as well. Our collaboration together as PlantBot Genetics is extremely political but can you explain how politics entered your work before we began to work together?

W - If art can be an intellectual conversation that allows artist and audience to explore issues of great philosophers and creative thinkers on a limiting flat surface with a few materials, why can’t that same form of discussion talk about things that effect daily life? As an artist, the first political issues I explored arose from my life as an artist. I spent much of my time in museums and galleries, and there were so many times I disagreed with how a museum presented the artwork, or even as a woman, how little my voice was respected in the overall art context compared to a man’s. It was easy to get angry, and when I am upset, it makes me want to act. When we met, this was what I was doing, traveling around the world critiquing the institution of art.

J - I remember that your work was angry but amusing. Can you describe one of these earlier works that were critical and humorous?
W - One of my favorites was called the “Butt Project”. If you critique the institutionalization of art, you are going to find yourself on the street at some point. Although more “risky” the street is such a democratic place where you can make space for yourself. It doesn’t matter if you’re a man or women but it does seem to recognize quality, sincerity and value in the artist's voice. I had spent a year living and studying in Rome, and an archeology mentor had told me that when they find a statue on a dig, they can immediately tell quality based on how well the butt it sculpted. Because of Hellenistic placement, the backsides of statues would often be turned towards a tree line or garden bush. Only the best workshops would place the same quality of work on the part of the sculpture that no one would see, so if you pulled it out of the dirt and it had a great butt, you had a piece of sculpture from a good workshop. I loved that a piece of art could be judged from its ass, so I collected as many photos of these Roman and Romanesque behinds as I could. After creating over 100 butt photos, I created a video that could beam from an off-grid projector. To complete the steps in this project, all I had to do was drive up to the side of a museum, turn my battery-powered projector on and put the movie on the edge of a museum wall. The outside and public face of the institution would become my canvas where I could poetically question the quality of the work inside with others who walked by.

W - We have been working together for seven years now. My art did not have your visual sensibility at the time. What made you think that we could work together?

J - It was a casual process. Early when we were dating it was easy to have access to each other, so it fostered a naturally collaborative environment. We were both working with people, and interested in guerilla art and politics and we were both nomadic for various reasons. Visually our work didn’t look alike, but the spirit of what we were doing, our politics, goals, and lifestyles were very similar.

W - I think we were both workaholics, so if we wanted to have a relationship, the only way to make it all work is if we traveled and worked on projects together! Don’t you agree?

J - There is truth to that, I can’t see being with anyone who doesn’t understand why I spend so much effort making art without feeling threatened. To be honest, we have many similarities but are also so different in formal methods and process. Each of us has opposing skill sets even though we embrace similar goals and interests. It is very practical to collaborate with someone who can do different things than yourself. Between us, we have the skills to do most anything we can think up. I can’t imagine it any other way. Even with all our different abilities we are still constantly trying to learn more, takes risks, and expand our practice into areas we don’t know much about such as robotics.

J – What do you think about our process?

W - I am sure that many people are curious about our collaborative process as artists working and living together, but I can’t remember a time when we sat down and discussed it among ourselves. I think we work together really well because our
personalities naturally have led us to want to engage in different roles and play various parts within our process. You have naturally been more of a performer and wanted to talk to people directly, and at the start, I was coming from a stealthy approach and happy if the front person wasn’t my role. My earliest street projects never directly shined a light on me. In my collaborative work with others communities in WYSIWYG I always tried to highlight the participants working alongside me, so, in the beginning, it was quite reasonable for you to be the out front person. In the early days of the project, that led to the natural dynamic of one of us as an active performer and one of us as the person who collected the documentation and organized off camera. Now, of course, we have learned from each other over the course of seven years and play both those roles and interchange the work hats more seamlessly, but everything between us has always been very organic.

J - I know you feel that people don’t always see how you fit into PlantBot Genetics. I think this is in part because early on you were more behind the scenes in the beginning, but also because the plant foliage based surfaces on the PlantBots more easily mesh with my previous works in plant-based installation and intervention. How do you feel about taking perhaps more of my visual aesthetics than your own?

W – Regarding formal choices, I have the maturity as an artist to make any formal decision look good, it never mattered to me what that was, cause I trusted that I had the talent and training to make many things visually engaging. I don’t think it would be problematic for either of us to change directions because we both have such great backgrounds in art making. Those experiences give us tools that make our messages more persuasive. If you make art that engages people, you need venture out and use all your tools.

When my work critiqued the art world, it had value and made sense to me, but it didn’t acknowledge all the things I could be angry about as a citizen. Being an environmental activist makes more sense to my life as a human on this planet. Your work was already doing that, so it was easy to come to your message and the methods you had begun to explore before we met. In the end, although it is wrong and pisses me off that I am treated shittier than a man in the world. It matters more if the food I eat kills me if the water is poison and the air doesn’t have any oxygen in it. These concerns affect all of us. Kicking ass despite obstacles proves I can be a feminist through any issue. It also helps to be working with a partner who gets that, and actively works for me to overcome the hurdles.

W - Our projects together have allowed me to create some things that I could have never done on my own, like our PlantBot ArtLab. Can you explain what that is?

J –The ArtLab, ia an off-grid 18' multipurpose trailer has been instrumental in providing a stage for collaboration. This mobile interactive space can be tailored to suit the project or community activity. Complex educational, interdisciplinary art events where anybody can enter, don a lab coat, push buttons, make experimental art, and come away with information based on their individual interest is exciting. With art’s ever-expanding and inclusive role, one never knows where we will end up!
W – I also think together we have been able to collaborate with a lot of other types of people like sceintest. What do you think working with scientists has brought to the project?

J - Reaching out to work collaboratively with biologists has broadened what we can discuss. They carry authority and meaning to the work that the average citizen doesn’t trust coming from an artist. It is recently the activities of scientists and artists grew far apart even though they are more alike than different. Both rely on close observation, ask open-ended questions, and regard failure as part of the process. There are many stresses in our natural world, and those finding possible solutions are extraordinarily innovative and encouraging. Unfortunately, scientists are not always great in sharing their answers in an understandable way. As artists, our challenge is uncovering creative ways to place science gently into the hands and minds of every citizen. Making the empirical more experiential, both science and art is made memorable and relatable.

W – Yes we have met some scientists who are quite social, but we have also met a few that are not good at sharing their research. As an artist, we have skills that bridge the gap between science and the average family to make an experience that is well researched, relatable and easy to understand. I think it always impresses the both of us how general audiences react when presented with an environmental problem that we are bringing to them. Without fail, citizens immediately ask what they can do to help. We found early on that our projects cannot only rely on hard facts and logical information about an issue. We had to disseminate workable solutions that reach into the hearts of people and establish emotional connections.

J - We can’t just preach from a podium, it's ineffectual. To make valid art today, you have to invite people into a new transformative space. As PlantBot Genetics, it begins with a humorous and silly spectacle. When they enter the ArtLab, the visitor is not confronted with social/political/environmental preaching but pop songs performed by a twisted variety of dancing robot-plants. Before you even begin to understand, there is a problem being discussed you are having a great time.

J - Wendy, I think about all those trickster gods from the First Peoples Mythology that you were exposed to as a child in Canada, can you elaborate?

W – Yes many native traditions hold the role tricksters play as any essential element to sacred truths. I think that the role artists have, as tricksters are not talked about enough. Our projects are designed to trick people into real issues. We are competing against anti-environmental messages that have so much money behind them, and that play off a type of sentimentality to what everyone imagines nature and the food looked like 100 years ago. Laughter also fits our budget, can stimulate the imagination, shape poetic connections, and our unexpected comical deceptions can instill a healthy sense of social criticism. If people are laughing you have hooked them, they want to see and learn more. We don’t have to bring the issue up when people are having a great time; they begin the conversation with us. I have to say it’s also way more fun for us.
W – Jeff, do you think our work also touches on spectacle?

J--Whether it is PlantBots, the Moth Project, or the upcoming work on chimney swifts, spectacle creates lasting impact. Each of us frames these works with the same care given to our individual explorations in the most traditional modes of paint and clay. It is not accidental that both craftsmanship and beauty is a companion to our role as a trickster and aids in encouraging constructive public conversations and civic action. This type of transformative public art bridges the history of craft with conceptual rigor in a way that allows art to enter into the world appearing like something that is already present and belongs. By staging performances that parody big biotech corporations, we disarm participants with humor and encourage participation. Soon serious conversations develop moving people to action and provoking social change.

W - Plus people then want to join the project and be collaborators with us, because they had a great time, and they wish to become part of that. Our audiences that also work with us through workshops, or interventions in public space, are having a blast. I firmly believe that activism does not have to be a drag. Serious work can be done in a great atmosphere. Communities are built off of positive experiences and mutual goals. Collaborative work is often in line with community building.

J – It seems as if the non-art context plays a role, would you agree the art becomes secondary?

W – In the end, much of the PlantBot audience who engages the project does not have to have any idea that our project is art. That is not an important issue for us. When we work with art students, it is important that they understand art can be viewed in many forms, but it is not an essential element to the environmental issues we want people to consider. If people engage in our project through direct conversation and curiosity, they will be more open than if those conversations are wrapped in the blanket of art. Even though many contemporary artists have tried to change this perception, for centuries, art was designed to be intimidating and for the elite, and the residual effects of that history are still felt in museums today. If people come to our project without their “Art Hat” on, they come to us openly, without the baggage art is burdened with.

J - We both know how to make something visually engaging, how to look at something critically, and how to use visual language to communicate ideas. Those skills come from our discourse as artists. It is precisely those skills that make us good communicators of ideas. However, the context of the art world and conversations of what is valued or not valued in it, are not relevant to our message with the viewer on the street. These things don’t become important until we are working specifically with art students as mentors or in gallery or museum. When the project is situated within that context, it has more issues of art at play. Our aim is to empower and get everyone involved. Grassroots activism galvanizes communities to think about issues and create dialogues that allow groups to digest information and arrive at informed opinions.
J - Do you imagine people standing around the water cooler talking about moths the same way they speak of the last episode of Walking Dead.

W - That is a great vision. I think we would both love the world where that happened, but instead of taking place in popular culture how about alongside popular culture? I know you love science fiction!

J - If you grew up in the 70’s it was hard not to be affected by it in some way. The original film of Godzilla (1954) portrayed a monster created by nuclear bombs, an allegory of the nuclear age and Japanese fears of Atomic technologies. Later in the 1989 film, Godzilla vs. Biollante, explicit warnings against the reckless and uncontrolled explosion in genetic manipulation were clear as Godzilla saves the day from a transgenic human/plant/monster hybrid. Films such as Jurassic Park and Godzilla portray monsters run amok as the ill-considered consequences of technology; they threaten human survival due to their ability to destroy and reproduce. Jurassic Park’s biological tinkering by the InGen Corporation is in the same spirit as Genetic modifications excite the imagination. It is wondrous that scientists can create entirely new species by mixing and matching preexisting genetic material. Genetic engineering is a great new technology that breaches genetic barriers not only between like species, but also between humans, animals, plants, bacteria, and viruses. By combining the genes of unrelated species, unique organisms not found in nature are created and pass these genetic changes onto their offspring. Monsters most definitely have evolved to become an organizing motif in our work.

W – I agree Mythologies, movies, and our real-life monsters reveal many of our deepest fears of the unknown, the unnatural, of science went berserk. With this heritage, it is not surprising we are instinctively wary of the new and revolutionary science of genetic engineering, a science born just 30 years ago but already creating new monsters. We have good reason to be afraid and can only guess what will happen to the world’s food supply after generations of such modifications occur. Another good monster metaphor is Frankenstein’s monster. Animal genes, as well as human genes, are now being incorporated into plants and animals creating, just yesterday’s incredible possibilities. Humans are now the architects of life, and as one might predict, the economic incentives are impossible for bioengineers and corporations to resist. So far, more than 100 patents are pending for transgenic animals, and some 6000 are pending for genetically engineered plants and animal microorganisms. Soon the biotech industry will be creating tens of thousands of GM organisms over the next few years. Today GM food crops unknowingly enter all our homes since the law does not require labels. These same crops have created superweeds and superbugs that cannot be controlled by conventional means. We must carefully consider the ethical, social, and environmental concerns as well as the possible risks to human health, animal welfare.

J – Don’t forget the future of agriculture, all these ideas lead to examples of risk our works take. It's funny because the risks I feel we take are not always the obvious ones. For example, many artist friends think that it is a risk to our personal relationship to work together. A standard joke we hear is they couldn’t work with their husband or wife no matter what. It does come with its unique challenges, but not risk per say as we have
developed a way of working together that respects that fact that we are so entirely different. Ultimately the trust we have with each other that grows from our personal relationship takes so much of the risk away. We just know that we are 100% on the same team, and many of our artistic choices grow from that place. So many couples do this, so it's surprising that more artists can't envision it. Art is so much a part of who we are that it just doesn't make sense to compartmentalize that huge area of our lives from each other.

W – Yes and it’s excellent to know that the other person is there to lean on, fight about ideas with, keep you up late at night in bed talking about art problems, and get your snacks! I think the biggest risk to our relationship though is being able to find the balance between work and quality of life, because when you live with your art partner, you can always be working. If you are a working couple, you need to find a system or a safe word for when one of you wants regular couple time, where you can just watch Zombies and eat chips. The thing that always surprises me is how neither of us is competitive towards each other. We both have a competitive streak. However with each other there is zero competition, and instead, we are always putting ego aside and actively looking for ways to bring the each other and the project up. Putting ego aside and trust are the best reasons to have an emotional space like the one we create for each other to work in.

J - Well all that sappy stuff aside…others say that working on the street without permission is risky. Of course, it could be, but I have never felt that way because people are curious and make us feel welcome. If they don’t, they walk away, or we simply move on. What I think is risky is the topic and conversations we encourage. Would you agree?

W – Yes, but not only conversations on the street. I agree that people are excited to have open discussions, and I too have always thought that the street was a welcoming place, and when used with sensitivity, a natural space for democracy. Clearly you must be patient and find common ground to allow a dialogue but most problems arise when we work with institutions. We have lost shows because of the conversations that we want to start, and been censored while our exhibitions have been up. When you are being censored passively or aggressively, you realize the importance of first amendment issues and why all are at risk.

W - Jeff can you remember examples of this happening?

J - It has occurred more often than I thought it would. I recall having already drawn up the exhibition list to receive an email from a college asking if we could show something else. Later it was revealed that the college didn’t want to place funding from a large biotech in jeopardy. A few faculty at a university where we are now exhibiting found our brand of genetic re-engineering creating singing, gyrating PlantBots troublesome and wanted to amend the exhibition. Parody, absurdism, and irony are great ways to speak the truth yet sometimes people, even highly educated ones, forget the context, always a few around who need guidance from a literal reading of a more poetic understanding, they usually laugh in the end.
W - If all we do is upset the ordinary events of one's day, we are doing our job as artists, when participants also begin to think and act in an informed and inspired manner, we are doing our work as artist-activists. Installations, interventions, and performance foster discussion and generate action in the area of ecological awareness. There is much risk in not acting against the inefficient and excessive consumption now being realized worldwide. The time for a regenerative combination of art and community is now.