



# The Artificial and the Natural: An Evolving Polarity (Dibner Institute Studies in the History of Science and Technology)

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Genetically modified food, art in the form of a phosphorescent rabbit implanted with jellyfish DNA, and robots that simulate human emotion would seem to be evidence for the blurring boundary between the natural and the artificial. Yet because the deeply rooted concept of nature functions as a cultural value, a social norm, and a moral authority, we cannot simply dismiss the distinction between art and nature as a nostalgic relic. Disentangling the cultural roots of many current debates about new technologies, the essays in this volume examine notions of nature and art as they have been defined and redefined in Western culture, from the Hippocratic writers' ideas of physis and techn? and Aristotle's designation of mimetic arts to nineteenth-century chemistry and twenty-first century biomimetics. These essays -- by specialists of different periods and various disciplines -- reveal that the division between nature and art has been continually challenged and reassessed in Western thought. In antiquity, for example, mechanical devices were seen as working "against nature"; centuries later, Descartes not only claimed the opposite but argued that nature itself was mechanical. Nature and art, the essays show, are mutually constructed, defining and redefining themselves, partners in a continuous dance over the centuries.

**Contributors:** Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, Horst Bredekamp, John Hedley Brooke, Dennis Des Chene, Alan Gabbey, Anthony Grafton, Roald Hoffmann, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, William R. Newman, Jessica Riskin, Heinrich Von Staden, Francis Wolff, Mark J. Schiefsky

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## **The Artificial and the Natural: An Evolving Polarity (Dibner Institute Studies in the History of Science and Technology) From The MIT Press Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #1948008 in Books
- Published on: 2007-10-19
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .56" w x 6.00" l, 1.26 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 344 pages



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#### Review

"All too often, what is considered 'natural' assumes an absurdly idealized view of nature that owes more to the delusions of Rousseau's romanticism than to any historically informed perspective. By revealing how sophisticated, and yet how transitory, the distinctions have been in the past, this book is an appealingly erudite invitation to begin the conversation." -- **Philip Ball**, *Nature*

#### About the Author

Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent is Professor of History at the University of Paris X. She is the author of *A History of Chemistry* and other books.

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