

Letter to Daniel Lie, the Living Entities that Co-Exist with They, and the Microbes, Fungi, and Spirit-Energies in Transformation



Daniel Lie, *Death Center for the Living*, made in partnership with Vivian Caccuri (sound desing and original music), 2017. Installation view: Performeum/Vienna Festwochen, Austria, 2017. Photo: Daniel Lie

Dear Daniel,

I am writing you this letter as if a thread could be stretched from Lima to Berlin, as if I could set off a movement not measured in kilometers but in amperes. I write as if my words could touch the heat of your projects' fibers and the dampness of their soil. But, alas, my written language is still too human. Before the universes of vegetable and bacteria life that inhabit your works, my words are weighed down by anthropocentric authority. My alphabet is too narrow and trivial for the conversation organic matter is capable of; mine is a beginner's language before the vibrations, sound waves, invisible emanations, and aerial and underground networks that, for millions of years, vegetable and microbial worlds have used to communicate.

You call your works "living entities," and I think that's a fitting term. Speaking of "entities" shifts our expectations from inert objects of the sort museums usually collect and exhibit to an experience of art as cohabitation and codependence. I am thinking of the flowers, fruits, seeds, mud, natural fibers, water, terracotta vessels, rocks, coal, and millions of microscopic beings brought together in installations like *To Mourn the Living* (2019), *Children of End* (2018), and *Death Center for the Living* (2017). In them, the decomposition of matter over the course of weeks makes way for constellations of new life. The bacteria of the putrefied flowers and fruits feed the fungi that spawn and the seeds that sprout, causing stems, roots, insects, mineral remains, spores, liquids, and smells to spread through the building's many spaces.

To enter your living entities means to move between macro and micro levels. We see, we smell, we touch. We witness quick changes in scale. What comes before us first is that which we can name, that



Exhibition view: Daniel Lie, “Human Supremacy: The Failed Project,” Casa do Povo, São Paulo, Brazil, 2019. Photo: Edouard Fraipont

which has been cataloged by human language (visible components of the earth, for example, or known vegetable species). But what there is, first and foremost, is a constellation of forms, interactions, and behaviors that exceeds the range of human sensory perception—things unknown and unnamed. I am fascinated by your desire to connect to that universe of unnamed entities. To do so means recognizing their potential and agency in the transformation of matter and the world. I acknowledge that my body is also a farm where millions of bacteria and life forms live and act beyond my control—tiny communities that, though they don’t belong to me, exist in a symbiotic relationship to my organs and tissue. And alongside those countless living forms inside my organism are thousands of dead and decomposed microscopic species—and all of that makes up what I call my body (an imprecise word for it). Living inside me are ten times as many bacteria as human cells. Perhaps I am not really my own, but rather belong to that variety of spherical, elongated, or spiral microorganisms. Rather than write, I wish I could have my body’s microbiome dance with the nameless entities that inhabit your works, exhale the steam from my mouth so that it interlaces with the stems and leaves of your ecosystems. I wish I could hold a conversation with you through heat, gravity, energy, and movement.

But instead, I decide to write this letter, because the limits of my human writing attest to a fantasy that must be dispelled, the fantasy that makes us see and represent ourselves as superior to all other species and organisms. If we recognize our limits, we might be able to engage the world differently. The title of a work of yours from 2019 puts it clearly: *Human Supremacy: The Failed Project*. I am aware that I too am part of that failed project. From the time I was a child, I was taught to inflict violence on other life forms. Much of what I learned growing up in Lima led me to have a tyrannical and instrumental view of natural species. Thanks to my father’s Andean background and the knowledge and use of medicinal plants passed down from my grandparents, there were, in my childhood home, gestures of respect and gratitude toward the vegetable world and their age-old powers. But that was not enough to offset the Western and colonial vision of progress according to which man’s mission is to master and siege. Even today in Peru, groups of people that call for non-human-centric forms of community (a continuum of human-mountains-rivers-forests) are seen as subversive and persecuted and attacked for it. For the extractivist economic model, territories and their living biomes are not interwoven cycles of energy in transformation, but rather just raw materials to be privatized for industrial development by nation states. For the white imaginary, the idea that the water and air are living things and that spiritual beings live alongside us is a delusion. I grew up in a city that pushed my body to assimilate violent



Daniel Lie, *Children of the end*, 2018. Installation view: Casa Triângulo, São Paulo, 2018

structures that disdain everything not human, because humans—they told us—are the bearers of reason and the owners of the future.

But, Daniel, the future obviously does not belong to us, just as the planet does not. The future is not human. I think again of *Human Supremacy*, the project you showed at Casa do Povo, a cultural center and art space in São Paulo, because it was, I think, a powerful exercise in underscoring forms of *cohabitation* and *codependence*. You occupied the building's two extremes: the underground level that houses a theater no longer in use, and the rooftop terrace where a range of activities regularly takes place. Mixing cotton fabrics, mud, linseed, straw, and fungi, your garden-offering held countless processes and forms of microscopic life. Though imperceptible in the daily workings of the institution, all that life shared the space with the inhabitants and users of Casa do Povo. You call them "other-than-human-beings"—a precise and delicate way to decenter the hierarchy of the human. The aromas and scents, dampness and heat that they give off are an invitation to converse in an always-different language. Your living entities are constant migration, a metabolic dynamic where organic matter and spirit-energy never cluster but always circulate. That cycle of physical and energetic transformation reminds us of the interconnectedness of species. What we call life began with bacterial communities. Their development is what enabled more complex structures and organisms to appear, utterly transforming the conditions of collective existence. The bacteria universe clearly came before us and it will live on after us. If the future belongs to anyone, it is to bacteria.

Your work is not the work of an ethnographer or an artist-biologist in pursuit of a scientific taxonomy—and I like that. You are not interested in the hierarchical classification of species but in stimulating the libido of their metabolic activity. And that arousing energy, those excited molecules know no gender or age; they are neither vegetal nor animal. Nutrition, decay, and regeneration are, in your work, like orgasmic powers that introduce changes in the properties of substances. Are bacterial interactions a possible way to engage in queer ecological politics? Do oxidation and decomposition constitute a new horizon of intimacy for our political fantasies? Can the assemblage of microbes and fungi that live in our mouths and our guts formulate other-than-human pedagogies as opposed to biological discourses that enforce normalcy?

Your *Rotten Trilogy* project is a powerful example of how the force of putrefaction also speaks to the



Installation view: Daniel Lie, *To mourn the living*, 2019. "The Negative Years," Jupiter Artland, Edinburgh, Scotland, 2019. Photo: Ruth Clark

personal, political, and sexual dimension of human lives considered undesirable, sick, damaged, contaminated, useless, and disposable—that is, all the bodies that fail to meet the productive demands of capitalism. I imagine those micro-communities of decomposing and germinating organisms as models of coexistence beyond the arrogance of human governance, beyond systems of meaning based on binary categories like masculine/feminine, life/death, organic/inorganic, and human/non-human.

And that gets me thinking about the notion of temporality. Your work invites us to escape from the normative speed of "human time." A number of years ago, theorist Elizabeth Freeman coined the term *chrononormativity* to describe a dominant model of time that naturalizes asymmetrical power relations and organizes the world according to a logic of maximum productivity, with its appointment books and calendars, clocks and watches. The pace of the "other-than-human-beings" that inhabit your living entities is completely foreign to that normative temporality. I am not advocating categorical differences between human time and more-than-human forms of time, but calling for vagabond, muddled, and indeterminate materializations of time. Your works are full of discontinuous paths, cyclical rhythms, and speculative durations that differ from the linear Western perspective of time closely associated with the instant gratification of consumerism. What appears instead is the time it takes fungus to grow, bacteria to multiply, insect eggs to hatch, water to evaporate and expand into the atmosphere, and so on. Leading human time astray is also a way to throw off the habits and expectations at play in aesthetic experience.

There has been much discussion in recent years of time-based art like performance. But, to a large extent, that debate has stayed within the confines of the history of Western modernism; neither the centrality of the human body nor the need for museums to venerate objects is questioned. The concept of time-based art has, though, enabled academics and curators to interrogate dominant logics of art collecting, preservation, and exhibition. But this Western concept fails to grasp the complexity of processes like yours, Daniel. Your living entities are not there to be interpreted but simply to *ensue*. Your works do not glorify *human agency*, but hone in on myriad organisms that exist *despite* humans. Your projects do not deliberately attempt to be ephemeral, but disavow human time and its universalist aspirations. But getting beyond anthropocentric authority is really hard. I try, with my words, to graze those borders, to show just how short my language falls.



Exhibition view: "Daniel Lie: Unnamed Entities," New Museum, New York, 2022. Photo: Dario Lasagni

I ask myself what exactly your work does to traditional art categories and disciplines. What artistic lineage do your living entities form part of? Can any of art's domesticated terminologies (sculpture, readymade, installation, environment, performance, social sculpture, relational aesthetics, etc.) really describe them? What does it mean for the rules of authorship that the works are not made by you alone but in collaboration with millions of nameless organisms? What or whom does your art represent? How do your living entities modify the physical movements, the security norms, and the pace of the work habits in the institution they occupy? I would venture to say that your work invites us to forget the history of Western art, and even a liberal, heterosexual, and cis history of science. Placing decomposition at the center of exhibition galleries challenges the somatic processes of the art institution. I picture mold and parasites budding messily from the dead matter in museums' floors and walls and disentangling art from Western hegemony once and for all. Might that be a way to exorcize their white colonial legacy? Perhaps bacteria are helping us to make the museum inhabitable for those who have, historically, been cast out of its spaces.

I find myself thinking as well about artistic and political projects that have, in recent decades, dared to parasitize the physical and affective architecture of the art world. Deceased philosopher and drag queen Giuseppe Campuzano's Transvestite Museum, for example, was an attempt at a counter-reading and a promiscuous intersectional conception of history. With an archive that included objects, images, textiles, masks, documents, and newspaper clippings, that museum set out to rewrite the past from a transgender perspective. Though methodologically very different from your work, the Transvestite Museum was politically akin insofar as it wondered how to construct a new social ecology from non-categorizable bodies, bodies "whose nature is uncertainty," as Giuseppe put it. For the Transvestite Museum, the future was not a movement forward but a return, a demand for unrealized pasts. Your work, Daniel, also invites us to connect to scenes of pre-human, post-human, in-human, and other-than-human life. I have a feeling Giuseppe would be riveted by your living entities and, in particular, by the unbridled growth of fungi decomposing organic matter, releasing enzymes, recycling energy, and returning it to its environment. I am sure Giuseppe would see them as a transvestite invasion of non-binary, masked, enigmatic, unclassifiable, glamorous, and glittery beings determined to blow up the human-centric paradigm.

You must have run into more than a few conflicts in presenting your living entities. After all, the mission of art institutions is to preserve works of art, to prevent their deterioration. But in your case,

Daniel, nothing remains: not only is nothing physical left for the museum to hold onto—the organic remains of your works turn into compost and return to the soil—but, even worse still, none of the elements in the galleries remain in the same state over the course of the exhibition. *Unnamed Entities*, the project you are now presenting at the New Museum, changes endlessly. The work is different each day, each hour, or each minute—it has radically changed while I have been writing you this letter. Those who visited at the beginning might have experienced it as flowering, aromatic, and fresh, while those who visited later might have found it fetid and decaying. Many might find being with it in its current state unbearable.

The organic gardens you assemble inside museums ask the question how to approach social desire differently. I can't help but envision your living entities as an erotic vegetal-animal-bacterial-techno-human promise. In the late eighteenth century, the Industrial Revolution consolidated an idea of extreme productivity and glorified the relationship between the (masculine) body and the machine—a paradigm furthered by extractivism. Your living entities remind us in no uncertain terms that true emancipation will not come from the human hand but from the damp seed; liberation will not be shaped by the brain but by non-human technologies engendered by the spread of mold; it was never the visual economy of ejaculation but liquids let off by the oxidation, comminution, and mineralization of organic matter.

Ritual and offering are also important to your practice. Eurocentric thinking and urban life have trained us to write off as superstition our bodies' capacity to dialogue with other-than-human-beings. Indigenous therapeutics remind us of the importance of asking plants permission before using them and of thanking them—a respect constantly worn away by Western arrogance that keeps us from imagining forms of truth beyond the discourse of the modern Enlightenment. Neurobiologist Stefano Mancuso is not wrong when he states that the brains of vertebrates may well be just an accident that evolved in a tiny number of living beings—animals—while in many other life forms the ability to learn and understand developed without any dependence on the brain. We are, then, just a chance event in the ecosystem—a thought I find pleasing. We are not the owners of anything, just components of forces constituting many worlds and multiple forms of awareness. And that interconnection that we humans have forgotten is what your living entities remind us of. They call on us to recognize the dependence between the microorganisms that inhabit our skin and the ones that dwell in leaves and flowers, the deep tie between the earth's minerals and our saliva's heat.

I too feel something of that urgency that has led you to invent a language shared with the earth, an anti-patriarchal poetics of multiplication, bio-digestion, and transformation. I am fascinated by the idea of finding exercises in survival in the biological interaction I see in your living entities. I think, for example, of the relations of mutualism established between a plant and a fungus, that is, of a form of interaction between two species where both obtain a benefit. At the same time, I resist idealizing those ties from the perspective of human morality and its logics of productive utility. I know that I cannot fully grasp what is taking place in your living entities. And I struggle against the human impatience that makes me want to understand everything, that tells me I have to know what your works are before writing about them. Next time I hope to use vibrations and sound waves to communicate with you instead of a rational, verbal thinking. It heartens me to know that the imminent fate of my body will be to decompose and turn into humus that might one day communicate underground with the compost of your recycled entities. Maybe we will be closer then. Sooner or later, we will all be part of the rhizosphere. And I wonder if keeping silent might not be another form of communication. Perhaps limiting our words could help demand other forms of ecological justice. I like the idea of turning off human language, of not striving to know. I am still trying to understand how to do that. And your living entities are teaching me.

With love,
Miguel A. López